WHEN LOVE IS KING

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A Story of American Life

BY

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When Love is King,

PREFACE

WHEN LOVE IS KING is sent forth to plead for a broader charity for those who differ from us in opinion, and for a more considerate judgment upon such as fall under reproach. If love win not the erring, nothing will win them; if love lift not up the fallen, nothing will lift them up. Love is regal; for God Himself is love, and He is King of kings.

THE AUTHOR.

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When Love is King

CHAPTER I

BEGINNINGS

THE Rev. Augustus Topliff was the pastor of a prominent church in one of the many flourishing little cities that sprang up in southern Ohio during the first half of the nineteenth century. He was still a young man, scarcely thirty years old, married and the father of two children. He possessed rather a commanding presence, a fine physique and an affable manner.

Long hair on the head of a man may safely be taken as an indication that there is a screw loose somewhere in the mechanism of his mental constitution, however well regulated he may believe himself to be. Usually it is a sign of chronic vanity, as indeed it was in the case of Mr. Topliff.

He was emotional and demonstrative in his religion and thoroughly orthodox in his faith. He believed in self-denial for other people, was fond of good eating, —in theory an ascetic, in practice, something of an epicure.

His ideals were high; but like the rest of us, he

seldom if ever realized them. "Aim at the moon, even if you do land on a dunghill!" Such was the advice he was wont to give.

Because of his apparent amiability, he had many friends; because of his great energy and enthusiasm, which good people often mistake for ability, he had many admirers who predicted for him a distinguished, if not a brilliant career in his church.

Among the members of Mr. Topliff's congregation was pretty little Marian Lee, who by nature had been endowed for noble things, and by fate destined to things ignoble. When a child, she was bright, vivacious, precocious. She learned without seeming to try and took on such polish as the schools then gave, as the bird takes on its plumage or the rose its beauty. From a child she had been an affectionate and exemplary person. At the age of twenty-four she was married to Gasper Lee, a man a dozen years her senior. On her part, it was a love match pure and simple.

Her reverence for her pastor was akin to awe, while her faith in him knew no bounds. Not many months after her marriage, the Rev. Mr. Topliff, in the rounds of his pastoral work, called upon Mrs. Lee.

"I am very sorry to learn, Marian," said he in the course of their conversation, "that Gasper is given to his cups more than is good for his health or for your happiness."

Poor woman! She was heart-broken over the sad discovery she had already made.

"O, Mr. Topliff!" she cried, "what shall I do? I have plead with him for my sake, for his own sake and for the——"

She paused suddenly, blushing crimson. She had hoped and prayed that when their child should come its influence, though unconscious, added to her own would prove stronger than her husband's appetite for drink. She buried her face in her hands and wept.

"What shall you do? Give him the choice between the two; if he will not leave off drinking, leave him."

"O, I can't think of that; I love him so much. And then when he is himself, he is so good and gentle. I know he loves me——"

"Tut, tut! Marian; don't be foolish. How much does he love you when he is not willing to let whiskey alone for your sake? He cannot help but see that it is killing you——"

"Mr. Topliff," broke in Marian desperately, "don't talk that way. I can't stand it. I would die for Gasper!"

The next Sabbath Mr. Topliff took occasion to deliver a scathing denunciation of men who did not love their families enough to let drink alone.

When Marian's child was born, she was overjoyed to see that her husband's paternal love was awakened. He would linger by the side of his sleeping child, hold its baby hand in his, gaze tenderly into its face and exhibit all the other symptoms of a proud father at the advent of his first-born. He was also much more tender and considerate in his attentions to the mother of his boy.

A new joy and a new hope came into Marian's life —the joy of being a mother—the hope of seeing her husband the man she had believed him to be. Alas! poor woman! Her new happiness was doomed to be

short-lived. Gasper, coming home late one night, staggered into her room and fell at full length upon the floor at her feet. From that moment she lost all hope for him. Her love for her husband died out as a fire that has consumed its fuel and left naught but ashes behind.

Two years later, Gasper died leaving Marian with her child in utter poverty. Having no one else to whom she could turn, she went to her pastor for counsel and encouragement.

"What are your plans, Marian?" said he. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know what to do unless I sew. I can——"

"How would you like to come to us as housekeeper and governess for our girls?"

"O, I should be so grateful!"

"I have talked with my wife about it and she is willing if you can find some other place for your boy."

"I could not think of being parted from my child. He is all the comfort I have now."

"We will help you find a good place for him until you can make some better arrangement. Then you can have him with you again. Think it over and let me know."

Marian hesitated long; but driven by poverty, the most relentless of all taskmasters, she finally consented to the proposal made by Mr. Topliff.

On the outskirts of the little city already mentioned, stood a somewhat pretentious dwelling after the antique style of architecture known as the colonial. The knoll on which it stood sloped gently in every direction and was covered with a natural growth of oaks

and elms with here and there an ash, a beech or a hickory tree. The trees had been sufficiently thinned out to admit in wholesome quantities the rays of the sun, while yet the grove was sufficiently dense to afford protection from the fierce blasts of winter and the too intense rays of the summer's sun. The grounds had been sown to grass and adorned with flowers and shrubbery. The graveled paths and driveway led back to the long porch of the two-story house, the white Ionic pillars shining from among the trees, revealing the quaint old mansion as it nestled, half concealed in its quiet seclusion.

A retired and wealthy Virginia planter had brought his family north and at great expense built and furnished for them this elegant home. But, it would seem, the social atmosphere of the north is not more congenial to a southern-bred woman than wintry winds are to birds of sunny climes. To satisfy his wife and daughters, the planter closed up the mansion with all its furnishings and returned to old Virginia.

Sometime afterwards, that portion of the community given to attending to other people's business, asked one another in open-eyed wonder, what on earth Caleb Hartman, whose wife could scarcely afford a dress sufficiently decent to wear to church, could want with the mansion and its extensive furnishings; and how, in heaven's name, he could pay the rent, to say nothing of keeping up the running expenses of such an establishment. Though a member of the church in good standing, Caleb Hartman was not held in very high esteem by his fellow-members. They had come to regard him as odd, to say the least,

because he persisted in spending his money as he pleased.

It was not a popular thing to befriend a woman who had made the fatal mistake of becoming a victim of some villainous man, even though that man might be a prominent member of society and even of the church. Then Mr. Hartman was considered peculiar —not to say stingy, because he seldom contributed when his money would have been sent away, perhaps to foreign countries where the people did not want the money unless, forsooth, they might spend it according to their own sweet will. When remonstrated with on the subject, he would say:

"Do as you like with your money. Send it to the heathen if you think best. God knows they need it badly enough. True it is—or used to be—that deluded mothers, poor creatures, threw their babies to the crocodiles in the Ganges; that the women are enslaved and the children put to death in those lands. Send them your money if you like. I am sorry that I cannot send them more of mine; but here in our own country and in our own city there are women who are enslaved to poverty and to worse than poverty. There are deluded mothers at home, heaven pity them! who throw their children into the streets, or in their despair commit a darker or more dreadful crime."

Soon after obtaining possession of the mansion, Mr. and Mrs. Hartman became even more unpopular than before. People were seen to come and go, usually in closed carriages and frequently after dark. The place soon secured for itself an unsavory reputation—not because it was thought that any vice was committed

there; but for the reason that, in the opinion of many wise and virtuous people, vice, if not crime, was encouraged there.

The Rev. Augustus Topliff felt it to be his bounden duty to visit his well-meaning but misguided parishioners and remonstrate with them upon a course which, as he and many of his flock seemed to think, was bringing reproach upon the church itself.

"I am sorry, Mr. Topliff," said Hartman after his pastor had made known the object of his visit, "that it should be thought, especially by you, that the work we are trying to do is casting reproach upon the church. In that case, I must request you to announce to the congregation next Sabbath my withdrawal from the church. I say this with deep sorrow, because I love the church to which my mother belonged when I was born and in which I have been reared from my infancy."

"But the work you are attempting to do, Mr. Hartman," replied Topliff, "tends to the encouragement of immorality. A girl learns that if she goes astray she has but to come to your 'Home' as you call it, and she will be taken care of. If she were made to feel that when once she takes a false step there is no return to respectability; that she has no place to go; that there awaits her inevitable publicity, disgrace and social doom, she would think many times before starting on the downward road. By sheltering such women you only encourage others to travel in the same way."

"There may be some truth in what you say, Mr. Topliff; but as I see it, when a woman thinks inevi-

table publicity, disgrace and social doom await her, she resorts to every device and all too often to crime itself to avoid such dire disaster. If it comes in spite of all she can do to prevent it, she feels that her life is blasted and her future hopeless, and sinks from bad to worse until lost to all self-respect and even hope itself. We take them, always insisting upon knowing their identity, befriend them, see them through their trouble, then restore them to their friends and give them one more chance for life. One such experience is usually enough. As for the children, we manage, if possible to get them into the hands of their mothers; but if unable to do this, we find them good homes elsewhere. Thus these unfortunates are given some chance in the race of life; whereas the innocent creatures would otherwise be placed at great disadvantage and be liable, especially if girls, to sink with their mothers to the lowest level."

"But, Mr. Hartman," replied the clergyman with impatience, "your whole business is based upon deceit. If these women are foisted upon society as virtuous and respectable people, society is deceived; if their children are placed in homes as legitimate children, those who take them are deceived,—it is all deceit. The scriptures say, 'lie not at all!'"

"So say I, Mr. Topliff," replied Hartman; "but as I see it, not all deception is lying. Much depends upon the motive. I doubt if there is any one who never intentionally deceives. Furthermore, many of these poor creatures are themselves cruelly and even criminally deceived; otherwise they would never need such protection as we are trying to afford."

"I cannot agree with you," insisted the preacher. "It is perfectly plain to me that your enterprise is an encouragement to deception and vice; if not to crime."

"I am sorry you think so; but I must tell you that I have no thought of giving it up."

"In that case, I think you do well to sever your relations with the church that it may in no sense be held responsible for what you do."

"So be it, Mr. Topliff."

And so the clergyman took his leave, glad if the truth must be told, that at last his church was to be rid of so undesirable a couple as Caleb and Mary Hartman.

A year passed by, and many were the women who, through the fidelity and helpfulness of these good people, were saved from "publicity, disgrace and social doom." In response to the door bell of the Home one dark and rainy night, an unexpected visitor was admitted to the reception room, who upon unbundling himself, proved to Caleb Hartman's astonishment, to be a well-known gentleman of the city, holding a high place in fashionable society and a prominent official position in the church presided over by the Rev. Augustus Topliff. He was a tall, raw-boned, ungainly man who went by the name of Crookshanks. He had labored industriously to find some connection between his name and that of the honored family of Cruikshanks; but with no more success than usually attends such attempts of vanity.

"To what am I indebted, Mr. Crookshanks, for the honor of this visit?" inquired Mr. Hartman.

"A matter of business, sir," replied the visitor.

"Not in our line, I hope."

"In your line."

"I am very sorry, Mr. Crookshanks; but if the case is one we ought to take, we will be glad to afford the woman any help we can."

"What are your charges?"

"Does the woman pay, or the man?"

"The man, though he is not rich by any means."

"Who is he?"

"That I am not to tell."

"It is yourself then, I suppose."

"No, indeed."

"Who is the patient? You know we never take a patient unless we know who she is."

"You know her very well. She is——"

He gave a name which made Caleb Hartman stare at his visitor in blank astonishment. Then an expression of sincere grief spread over Hartman's kindly face. He sat in silence a few moments, busy with his own thoughts to the utter forgetfulness that there was such a person as Mr. Crookshanks in the world. Recalled, however, to the fact that such a being not only had existence but was actually present on a matter of grave importance, he asked with sadness in his voice,

"Is there no possibility of mistake about this matter?"

"None whatever, I am sorry to say."

"I have known her," said Hartman, speaking more to himself than to his visitor, "ever since she was a little child. A better, a truer woman never lived. There is some infamous villainy at the bottom of this affair." Then turning to Mr. Crookshanks he con-

tinued: "You may depend upon our doing anything we can for her."

"There is one condition I have not mentioned, Mr. Hartman. There must needs be a mother, but there must be no child."

Caleb Hartman arose, flashed a look of scorn upon Mr. Crookshanks, handed him his hat as with suppressed wrath he said,

"On that condition, sir, there is not money enough coined to hire me to take the case!"

"I assure you, Mr. Hartman," apologized the emissary, "that no offense was intended. In naming that condition, I was simply following my instructions."

After Mr. Crookshanks had gone, there was some earnest conversation between Caleb Hartman and his good wife, punctuated by the sympathetic sobs of the latter.

"Mother," said he, "you must go and see her in the morning, bring her here as your assistant, and we will do all we can for her."

Some months after the visit of Mr. Crookshanks to the Hartman Home, Mrs. Hartman was holding in her arms a helpless little baby girl. On the bed by which she sat, lay the baby's mother, her face wet with burning tears.

"I must devote my life to the care of this little one," said the weeping woman. "It must never know its unhappy mother. Both you and Mr. Hartman have been so good to me! O, if God would but forgive me this wrong to myself, to this innocent baby and to my darling boy!"

More she would have said, but her words were

choked in sobs of penitential grief. Mrs. Hartman knelt beside the poor woman, whose face was almost as white as the pillow beneath her head. She slipped her arm around the penitent's neck and mingled her tears of sympathy with the tears of penitence.

"Never mind, my dear! You have been sinned against by that cowardly villain who does not dare to come forward now and share your heavy burden, but skulks in the dark while you weep your eyes out in prayers for forgiveness. But God is good, my dear, and does forgive you and will help you to take care of your children."

"I must never see my boy again," said the mother. "I would not dare to look him in the face. You and Mr. Hartman will, I know, help me to find good homes for my children. Then I will hover about this little one and protect her with my life if need be. I must leave my boy to the care of others and of God. I want the baby to be named Edna, and to have the name tattooed on her arm so that I shall be able to identify her anywhere and at any time."

"It shall be as you wish, my dear," said Mrs. Hartman.

"As soon as I am able, I must go away; for I could not bear to see her carried off by strangers."

About six months later, a man by the name of Potter and his wife came to the Home with a letter of recommendation from the Rev. Augustus Topliff. They desired to adopt a girl baby. There was but one in the house,—a sweet little thing by the name of Edna; but whoever would take the child must adopt it outright and treat it as they would their own.

"Of course we will do that," said Mrs. Potter; "but I do not like the name."

"You may give her any other name you like," said Mrs. Hartman, pushing up the sleeve and revealing a chubby little arm on which the name Edna was tattooed in blue ink about midway between the elbow and shoulder. "But she must retain also the name her mother gave her."

So it was arranged that little Edna should become the adopted daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Potter, under the name of Nettie Edna Potter.

Not many months thereafter, the Rev. Augustus Topliff secured from those in authority in his church, an appointment as superintendent of its affairs in a far-away frontier region; and, clothed with almost unlimited power over his subordinates, took his leave for that distant field.

CHAPTER II

NETTIE POTTER

NINE years have passed since little Edna became Nettie Potter. She is now a thin, bony, angular creature who neither asks your favor nor cares for your sympathy. Her face is an interesting study, chiefly because of its contradictions. It has no beauty,—such at least would be one's first impression. The upper and lower parts of her face are in almost constant contention with each other. High and narrow forehead, prominent cheek-bones, large, greenish-blue eyes,—the whole overcast with an expression of mingled sorrow and defiance. How different the lower part of her face! The chin is perfectly formed, and slopes in symmetrical curves back to a throat and neck almost as small and as graceful as that of a swan. Her mouth possesses an indescribable charm; her lips breathe warmth, trust, affection, mirth. Over the upper zone of her face dwells an ominous cloud; while the lower is bathed in sunshine. Above, there is a mantle of frown which is seldom laid aside; below, a smile that seldom disappears. A thundercloud hovers above the sunlit landscape.

When in animation, the smile sometimes spreads until the whole face is wreathed in light. Then the eyes become a delicate blue and glow with a radiance

which is almost dazzling. In the presence of this beaming child, one feels his whole being warmed and thrilled as in the presence of an angel of light. When in repose, and especially when brooding over some real or fancied wrong, the cloud spreads until her face is covered with gloom. Then the eyes assume their strange greenish hue, the smile departs from the lips, while a sinister expression pervades her countenance. Then one feels that this angel of light has suddenly become transformed into one of the furies, and that from out these greenish, angry eyes might leap a flash as scorching and withering as a blaze of lightning.

This is Nettie Potter, a mere child who already has the face of a woman.

She believed Mr. and Mrs. Potter to be her parents and called them father and mother. These nine years she has lived in the country where her father owned and operated a small farm. The country school and church were the only places of public resort. Nearly all her schoolmates disliked her, and she as cordially disliked them. One reason for their antipathy was that she, despised because of her diminutive size and her homeliness, nevertheless outstripped them all and soared above them in her studies like a hawk above goslings. At war with her fellow-pupils and having a strong vein of vindictiveness in her nature, she was constantly getting herself into trouble with her teacher because of some petty spite indulged towards them. Being reproved and punished, she became defiant. She soliloquized thus:

"When they pick on me they'll get pinched or stuck with a pin, even if she does whip me. They had

ought to get licked too. Some day I'll get even,—so I will!"

Nettie's life at this early period had already become essentially a life of hatred. She had come to feel that no one loved her. Why should she love any one? Her father often chastised her with a heavy hand and invariably continued his punishment until he compelled her to say that she loved him; while in her heart she hated him. He could bring her poor little body under subjection, but her unconquerable will defied him to the last. The mother seemed to take sides against Nettie in her troubles with her father. Her defiance then included her mother. When she was about two years old, a baby girl made its advent into the family. The parents lavished all their affections upon the newcomer. This aroused Nettie's jealousy.

"They never treated me that way!" thought she as she grew older.

Still further estranged by this partiality, Nettie was driven to seek her companionships elsewhere. When neighboring relatives and friends came to visit the Potter family, she shunned them.

"They don't want to see me," she would say and then steal out into the barn where she would spend her time feeding and petting the horses for which she had an almost passionate fondness; or she would play about the premises with her favorite dog. There were two boys in the family, older than herself, who were not unkind to her. She loved them and sought their companionship in play.

The child was compelled to attend services and

Sunday-school at the neighborhood church. There she received what little religious instruction and training she had. Being an apt pupil, she soon obtained a pretty clear knowledge of the teachings of the Bible as it was then interpreted. The doctrine she had imbibed might be summed up in two thoughts: first, God's hand was against anybody who was not good; second, she, Nettie Potter, was bad. Her quick mind was not slow in drawing the conclusion that God's hand was against her. Then in her heart, she associated God with her father and mother and defied Him.

Whose fault was it that this wee scrap of humanity had come to feel that its father and mother and every one else, including God Himself, were in league against her? Certainly not her own. Why did she not love her father and mother? Because they had taught her by their coldness and harshness that they did not love her. Why did she not love God? Because from her earliest recollection, in her home and at the church, by her parents and by her religious teachers, she had been made to believe that God was angry with her because she was bad. Yet she could see no reason why God should be angry with her, any more than she could see why her father should so cruelly and outrageously punish her.

As she grew older, Nettie developed an astonishing aptitude for learning. At thirteen, her father took her out of school. "Ther'll be no doin' nothin' with 'er ef she gits to knowin' too much," was the reason assigned. So this little hawk was cooped up in the house lest its talons and beak should become too sharp for the comfort of the rest of the flock.

It would be a great mistake to suppose that this unfortunate little girl was by nature a cynical misanthrope. As the gold and silver are hidden beneath the snow-covered and icebound rocks of the mountain, so the stony exterior which Nettie presented to every one, but concealed the rich vein of natural sympathy and affection which lay buried in her breast. She loved deeply and intensely; but her love went out towards her pet kitten and her good friend Rover, the intelligent and faithful shepherd dog. More than once, when her father had severely punished her and her mother had turned her away without a word of sympathy or comfort, had she gone out into the yard, crawled into Rover's kennel and imagined, perhaps not without reason, that the dog, at least, sympathized with her and loved her. At all events, she took comfort in the fact that he was not unkind to her.

But she had come to feel that anything she loved was taken away from her in spite. From a litter of kittens she had selected a little one, perfectly white except a tiny patch of black upon its throat, and called it her baby. One day Mr. Potter ordered the kittens to be drowned,—Nettie's baby among the rest. She still had her dog. Many a ramble they took among the trees of the neighboring woods and along the banks of the small river which ran through her father's farm. One morning she called Rover to give him his breakfast; but he did not respond. She looked into his kennel and found him, dead. He had been poisoned during the night. Nettie's grief was equaled only by her anger. In her despair, she vowed never again to love a living thing, never again!

CHAPTER III

A VISITOR

THERE was one marked and pleasing exception to the general antipathy held by this little cynic. From the time Nettie was scarcely a year old, a slender little woman in black had paid periodical visits to the neighborhood as a teacher of fancy needlework. She frequently visited the home of the Potters, though no one was there to whom she could teach her art,—Nettie being yet a baby and Mrs. Potter having little need and no relish for such things. The little woman, however, continued her visits, professed to be exceedingly fond of babies, and gave to the child many little garments which Mrs. Potter carefully folded away and found convenient a little later on when her own youngster made its appearance.

Nettie soon began to take notice of the little woman and to form an attachment for her. When she became old enough, the teacher of fine needlework began to instruct her in the use of the needle and was delighted at the skill and enthusiasm with which the child responded to her instructions. Many were the pieces of crochet and point lace spun from Nettie's nimble fingers while her parents thought her sound asleep in her little illy-lighted room under the roof.

The needle-woman had often asked the privilege of making her home with the Potters while in the neigh-

borhood; but without success,—the plea being lack of room.

"I am not at all particular," said the little woman one day, when for the hundreth time she had met with the same refusal and on the same plea. "A cot, or a pallet on the floor will be good enough, and I will gladly pay you for your trouble."

There was something so eager and pathetic in the woman's appeal that Mrs. Potter's heart was touched. Futhermore, the woman was still young, gentle, and winning in her manner. A sweet and melancholy beauty of face could not be hidden or obscured by the plain black clothes she wore. In these years of casual acquaintance with Mrs. Potter, she had won her way into the good graces of that spasmodically kind-hearted woman so that it was not easy to persist in the refusal.

"I suppose," said Mrs. Potter, after some hesitation, "that we might arrange for you to sleep in Nettie's bed and make her a pallet on the floor."

If Mrs. Potter had noticed the flush on the woman's face, and if she had known of the quickened heart beats beneath the suit of black, she would have opened her eyes in wonder; but she was a matter-of-fact woman, not given to close observation. Nettie was listening to the conversation, willing to give up any comfort in order to have her friend stay. Her willingness was not wholly unselfish; for while she had learned to love the Little Woman in Black, she had also learned by experience that she fared much better when there was a visitor in the house.

"O no!" said the little woman, "I would not think of that. The child shall not give up her bed; but

maybe she will share it with me,—won't you, my little lady?"

If Nettie had had any lingering feeling that possibly this woman, like the rest of the world, might be in league against her, it melted away under this answer, given with so tender and winning a smile. When had any one refused to allow her to be deprived of her own? When had any one bestowed upon her such a smile and called her a little lady? To Nettie's delight, it was arranged that the needle-woman should stop with the Potters and share Nettie's humble bed.

The first night, after they had retired to Nettie's room, the woman took from her valise a dainty white gown trimmed at the wrists and the throat with genuine point lace which she, herself, had made. After bathing the child's bony little body, she put the gown upon her. While dressing her for bed, she looked time and again at some letters tattooed upon the child's left arm. The letters were distinct and plain, but they soon became blurred as the little woman looked at them through the tears that filled her eyes. But Nettie noticed none of this; she had eyes just then only for the white gown and its pretty lace. So well pleased was she that one of her radiant smiles overspread her face and she stood before the little woman transformed into a vision of loveliness. Overcome by an irresistible impulse, the woman gathered Nettie into her arms, passionately kissed the child's lips and cheek and brow, mingling her tears with her caresses. Nettie was greatly astonished at this outburst of affection. The woman, seeing Nettie's look of wonder, felt that some explanation must be given.

"I once had a little girl," said she. "If she had lived she would be about your age. When I see you dressed so sweetly, you make me think of my own little girl. Come now, let us to bed."

Nettie was soon fast asleep. The woman held the sleeping girl in her arms, listening to the wild throbbings of her own heart and thinking of many things.

Not many days thereafter an incident occurred which came nearly breaking up the arrangement in which the little woman was finding so much happiness. She was in the small room up-stairs, busy with her needlework, when she was startled to hear Nettie screaming in agony in one of the down-stairs rooms. A vision of the child with her clothes on fire flashed upon her mind. She dropped her work, flew down the stairs without knowing whether her feet touched the steps or not, and rushed into the room from which the cries came. There was Nettie held across Mr. Potter's knee with his left hand while with his right he was raining heavy blows upon her. The child writhed in agony while a look of torture and rage distorted her tear-covered face.

The little woman might have as easily controlled the lightning as herself. She flew at the man with the fury of an enraged panther and buried both hands in his whiskers. When at last he succeeded in disengaging her fingers, many hairs of his beard were held in her convulsive grasp.

"Wretch! Villain!" she cried, panting for breath. "Lay your hands upon that child again at your peril!"

Potter was in utter confusion at this furious attack. At heart he was a coward, and his first impulse was

rather to find some excuse for his conduct than to resent the assault upon his person and his authority. It was not until later that his outraged dignity and authority asserted themselves. Then it was that his rage arose into a towering passion and the edict went forth that "that wild-cat" should be expelled from his domain and never again darken the door of his domicile.

The little woman saw at once and very much to her sorrow, that she had allowed her zeal to triumph over her judgment. Returning to her room, she threw herself upon the bed, when all her pent-up rage and her bitter disappointment gave way to a flood of tears. She quickly resolved to make any sacrifice of personal feeling rather than lose her place near the child. While Mrs. Potter could not be expected to take sides against her husband, she was prevented from taking sides against his assailant by the little woman going to her and telling her how sorry she was that she had made "such a fool" of herself. This prepared the way for an apology to Mr. Potter himself, after his righteous wrath had been given time to cool. Thus the breach was healed, and the edict of banishment, while not recalled, was not enforced.

CHAPTER IV

BLACK DAN

WHEN Nettie was about fifteen years old, she had a habit not uncommon among children, of doing as she pleased when her parents were away. When left alone she had a mania for riding the wildest horses there were on the farm. Her favorite was a young horse called Black Dan which no one was able to manage. He seemed to think that, inasmuch as a saddle did not grow on his back, nobody had any right to put one there. Furthermore, his legs, in his opinion, were made chiefly to carry himself beyond the reach of any one who tried to catch him and to defend himself against the too near approach of another whether man or beast. He regarded it as his special prerogative to remove the scalp of any person who attempted too great familiarity with comb and brush. In short, he was a very fine but vicious specimen of physical horsehood. So fleet of foot was he that in his playful racings about the pasture, the very birds of the air seemed not to fly more swiftly.

Every one about the place knew that Nettie could go up to the horse wherever he might be; that indeed he would frequently come to her when she went out to him in the pasture; that she had but to call him by name when he would immediately come at her call; that he was never known to show her the slightest ill

humor, though all the more ugly towards any one else when she was near him. On her part, Nettie found her one congenial spirit in the black horse that every one else so much disliked and feared.

How had she won the confidence and affection of this vicious animal? Seeing him roughly and even cruelly handled one day, she took pity on him; and after he had been put into a stall to be fed on short allowance until his spirit should be subdued, she plucked some grass and fed it to him through an opening in front of his manger. This was followed up by other little acts of kindness until Black Dan was eating sugar out of the slender hand that had stolen it for him. Thus it was that Nettie Potter and Black Dan became fast friends and had many an hour of rare fun and some very serious work together.

Imagine the astonishment of Mr. Potter upon returning from the village one evening, at finding Nettie dashing about the pasture at a break-neck rate on the bare back of the vicious Black Dan,—her hair flying in the wind, her eyes aglow, the habitual smile of her mouth having lighted up her whole face. She was in high glee, while Dan was evidently enjoying the fun fully as much as his rider. There seemed to be something in common between the two.

Nettie expected to be severely scolded; but to her surprise, when she drew up before her father, she found him smiling approbation. For once Mr. Potter's admiration for his daughter was excited. He looked at her and then at the horse a moment. Prompted by a momentary generous impulse, he said:

"Well! You seem to be pretty well matched. I

guess you kin hev 'im ef you'll agree to take care on 'im!"

Nettie glided down from the horse, ran to her father and throwing her arms about his neck, cried:

"Did you say I could have Dan? Is he mine? O, you are the best papa in the world!"

Then running back to the horse, she patted him on his face, kissed his nose and called him by all the pet names she could think of. For a little while it seemed difficult to determine which she loved the more, Black Dan or her father; though the truth is the horse received a little more petting and was called by more endearing names than was the father. During the evening the rest of the family noticed something quite unusual in Nettie. She was very attentive to her father, wore an uncommonly bright smile and was observed to sit down close to him once or twice and look up into his face with an expression of affection seldom seen in her eyes. During the evening meal she was on the alert for opportunities to serve her father and was quick to anticipate any want of his. Just before going to bed, she actually kissed him good-night, an unheard of thing!

So Nettie went to bed and slept, and dreamed the while of being on the back of Black Dan, upon a broad smooth road winding along the bank of a beautiful clear stream, with rows of stately trees on either side the road. And Dan! Never did he arch his slender neck and toss his shapely head with greater pride! And why not? Was not his bridle of softest leather of finest finish, adorned with silver buckles and trinkets? And did not his own little mistress sit

on his back as light as a fairy with her dainty foot in a golden stirrup? Did she not hold the silken rein in her white left hand, and in the other an oaken sprig which she had broken from an overhanging limb and with which she gently stroked his mane as she called him by pet names and told him about her plans for future days? And did he not, at a word from her gently spoken, spring along the broad road with such speed as would outstrip the flight of the reindeer, and with such lightness of touch that his mistress did not even hear the sound of his hoofs upon the hard smooth ground? Yes, all this he did and more, in the pleasant dreams of Nettie Potter; while in fact, Dan had stretched himself yonder upon the soft meadow and was sleeping away with all his might.

There were two instruments with which Nettie seemed by nature to be marvelously skilled, namely, the pen and the needle. Her father had allowed her with her two brothers to attend a writing-school conducted at nights in the neighborhood schoolhouse. Upon giving her some copy-plate to pattern after, her teacher was astonished at the excellence and beauty of the child's writing. Her long slender fingers seemed to have, untaught, the complete mastery of the pen and of the needle.

Nettie was now nearly sixteen years old. About this period she took it into her head to earn some money of her own. She had never been the owner of a dollar in her life. But what could she do to earn money? Knowing her own skill in handling the pen, she formed the bold purpose of conducting a school similar to the one she had attended. No sooner

had she resolved on this course than, with her characteristic promptness and energy, she set about putting her resolution into effect. The occasion was favorable for immediate action, her father being away to the village and not expected to return until late. Black Dan was soon under saddle and Nettie was out on the road in search of pupils for the proposed writing-school. Towards evening she returned in proud triumph, having obtained five pupils, each of whom had agreed to give one dollar for ten lessons. Therefore she had made five dollars in a single afternoon! She had no doubt of being able to secure as many more. She was greatly elated; and as many another has done, began to count her money before she got it and to plan how she could spend it to the best advantage. But the one thing which elated her most was that she, Nettie Potter, was to have the large sum of ten dollars by the end of two weeks and earn it all herself!

When her father returned from the village, she ran to him all aglow with her enthusiasm and told him what she had done. You have seen early vegetation grow up rapidly under the balmy sun of early springtime, break through the earth's crust and thrust itself up into the air and sunshine for a day. You have seen the night come on chill and bleak; and the next morning the vegetation of yesterday lay wilted and blackened beneath a biting frost. So it was with Nettie's hopes and aspirations. Under the genial spirit her father had shown the day before, her purposes and plans had sprung up like the tender blades of early corn. When her father came home at night cross, crabbed and somewhat the worse for drink, his words

of objection and discouragement fell upon Nettie's budding prospects like biting frost on tender blades. She went to bed and cried herself to sleep, and dreamed—not of a delightful ride on the back of her faithful horse, but of being alone in a dense forest where there is no road; going, she knows not where, her clothes being torn to shreds by the thorns and briars on every hand, her shoes wearing out and falling from her feet which bleed from the wounds they receive but do not feel; of wild beasts which throng the forest and follow ever closer upon her track; of the forest becoming wilder and denser still until she can proceed no further; but overtaken by impenetrable night, sinks down exhausted and ceases both to struggle and to dream.

The next morning her father informed her that while in town the day before, he had sold Black Dan to a man who was purchasing horses for the government; and that on the following day he was to take the horse to the village and if he met the requirements of the government, the agent was to accept him and pay over the purchase price. For once Nettie was furious, and arose in outright rebellion. She reminded her father in very emphatic language that he had given the horse to her and had no right to sell him. But seeing that her remonstrances availed nothing, she besought him in tears not to sell her horse. It was all in vain. Finding that she could not prevail upon him either by remonstrance or entreaty, she flatly told him that if her Black Dan was sold, she should go with him wherever he went.

On the afternoon of the day when Nettie and her

father had their quarrel over the sale of Black Dan, Mr. and Mrs. Potter went by previous arrangement to spend the evening with a family of relatives a few miles away. When they returned, all the other members of the household had retired for the night. Before going to their bedroom, they sat in silence for some minutes, neither uttering a word but both thinking of the same thing. At length Mr. Potter broke the silence by abruptly asking,

"Do you think thet little hussy will do what she threatened to do this mornin'?"

Mrs. Potter was never known to interpose the slightest objection to anything her husband proposed. True, he often asked her advice; but never had the slightest intention of following it unless it fully conformed to his own preconceived opinions. She discerned from the question he had just asked that he was somewhat ill at ease over his stormy tilt with Nettie that morning, and that he had some anxiety about what she might do when it came to the pinch of delivering Black Dan to the government agent. She thought she also discovered that he did not feel at all comfortable in not having kept faith with Nettie. When Mr. Potter asked her the pointed question whether she thought "the little hussy" would do as she had threatened, she employed the tactics of answering his question by asking him another.

"Did you really give her the horse?" she inquired.

"Y-e-s, I told her she could hev 'im ef she would take care on 'im," was his rather hesitating reply.

"Did you really intend that she should have him?" was Mrs. Potter's next cautious question.

"Wall," replied Mr. Potter, "none o' the rest on us could do nothin' with the black devil; but when you hev a offer of a hundred and fifty dollars fer a piece o' property which you cal'lated as wuth nothin', I guess it ain't to be refused. I 'spected thet Net 'ould hev a tantrum when she found out I had sold 'im; but I didn't s'pose she'd be fool 'nuff to git up and defy me and say I shouldn't sell 'im."

"Don't you suppose," ventured Mrs. Potter, "that she would be satisfied if you would give her part of the money?"

"Not ef I'd give her all I'm to git fer 'im, twice over."

"Well," said Mrs. Potter, "if she persists in doing what she threatened to do, what are you going to do about it?"

"Dam 'er! I hev a notion to let 'er hev the horse, set 'er adrift an' let 'er go to the devil!"

With this not very affectionate piece of profanity, Mr. Potter, whose wrath was rapidly getting the better of his judgment, arose abruptly, went to his bed and had soon forgotten his daughter, Black Dan and all the rest of the world, in a sleep so sound that it did not even admit of dreams. Ah! Mr. Potter, sleep on! Unwittingly, in thine anger, thou hast expressed what many another father has done, and when too late, would have given his right hand, his right eye—even his heart's blood to undo—namely; by his coldness, harshness, unkind acts and words yet more unkind, by lack of sympathy, encouragement and love, set his daughter adrift and let her go, even with a push, "to the devil!"

They were early risers at the Potter house, all except Mr. Potter himself, who generally remained in bed while the boys and the hired man fed the horses and cattle and did the other outdoor chores preparatory to the day's toil on the farm, and while Mrs. Potter, assisted by one or both her daughters, prepared the morning meal. When breakfast was nearly ready, he was called, attired himself, took his place at the head of the table and waited till all were seated, when he would "say grace" after the most punctilious fashion. He would swear most unrighteously, drink like a sinner, and seldom went to church; but invariably said grace at meals. On the morning of the day when he was to take Black Dan to the market, he took his place as usual, began to hurry his wife up to get breakfast on the table and to swear because the boys and the hired man were not ready to eat.

"Where is Net?" he asked suddenly.

"She has not come down yet," replied Mrs. Potter.

"The little hussy is sulkin'. Go and call her, Annie," said Mr. Potter to his younger daughter.

Annie obeyed, but soon returned with a look of astonishment upon her face and reported that Nettie was not in her room and that her bed had not been occupied during the night. At the same moment one of the boys came in and said that Black Dan could nowhere be found. The truth flashed upon all, but no one uttered a word. Mr. Potter sat gazing at his plate until all were at the table, when grace was duly said. But no one felt like eating. There was one vacant chair. One of the brothers who sat next to this chair soon broke into sobs and left the table. One after

another followed until Mr. Potter was left alone. The tears stood in his eyes—unaccustomed to weep. At last he too left the board and the breakfast stood untasted upon the plates. It had come to their hearts, alas! too late, that after all they loved the little, passionate, headstrong girl who had just vanished from the home.

Inquiry was made in every direction; but, strange to say, no one could be found who had seen her. She had concealed herself and her horse in a thicket near by and waited till night came on; when, coming out of her hiding, she trusted herself to her faithful Dan, and rode on and on and on into the darkness. Whither? She did not know. But when the day dawned she was far away from the home where she had lived all the years of her young life, and where the really happy days she had seen could have been numbered on her fingers without counting them twice.

The ties which had bound her to her home had been weakened by a long course of neglect, a long series of unkind acts which sometimes amounted to cruelty, by the scourge of a scolding tongue, and by what was worst of all, the want of genuine warmth of sympathy and love. O, how her heart had hungered for this! The tension came at last which the tie could no longer stand. It snapped asunder as the cable parts which holds the vessel against the swirling current, and she drifted away; while such kindness even as she had bestowed upon her horse would have bound her to her hearth-stone with cords softer than silk and stronger than steel.

CHAPTER V

THE LITTLE WOMAN IN BLACK

SOME three weeks after Nettie's disappearance, the Little Woman in Black came upon one of her periodical visits to the Potter neighborhood, and as usual, went immediately to Mr. Potter's house. Generally Nettie would fly out to meet the little woman, and throw herself into the visitor's arms. Then after kissing her and being kissed a dozen times or more, would cling to the woman's hand and go smiling and chattering like a magpie along the walk leading from the gate to the house. But on this occasion Nettie did not appear.

"She does not see me," thought the little woman. She was met at the door by Mrs. Potter with the usual demonstrations of welcome, though the visitor was quick to notice that there was some subtle change in her manner. She glanced quickly about expecting Nettie to appear. Mrs. Potter saw and rightly interpreted her glance.

"And how have you all been since I saw you last?" inquired the little woman. She was informed that all the family had been in their usual health, except that Mr. Potter's rheumatism had been giving him some trouble of late. Still no Nettie.

"She may be at some of the neighbors or on an errand," thought the little woman. She had removed her bonnet and laid aside a light knit wrap she had

worn about her shoulders, every moment thinking of the absent child and growing more uneasy lest something might be wrong.

"Where is Nettie?" she asked at length, unable longer to repress her anxiety.

Mrs. Potter dropped into a rocking-chair, drew her apron to her face and began to cry with all her might. The little woman sprang to her feet, grasped Mrs. Potter by the wrists and forcibly pulled her hands from her face.

"What has happened to the child?" she exclaimed, agitated by a nameless dread.

"I—I—knew,—you would be—be greatly—shocked and g-grieved!"gasped Mrs. Potter between her sobs.

"Great heavens! is she dead?" cried the little woman, a great choking sob arising to her throat. She felt the room begin to whirl around while everything grew black about her.

It was Mrs. Potter's turn to be frightened now, so white and ghastly had the little woman become. But for the older woman's strong arms, the visitor would have fallen.

"Oh, no! no! she is not dead——"

She did not finish the sentence, but easing the little woman into the chair, she unfastened the patient's clothes, held the camphor bottle to her nostrils and applied such other restoratives as were at hand. As the little woman was sinking into the swoon, she had just enough consciousness remaining to catch the words "no! no!" These tended to prevent the fainting fit into which she was falling. After a moment or two she smiled faintly and said,

"There, there, I am better now. You said she was not dead. Has she met with any accident? Or is she sick? Pray, Mrs. Potter, tell me what has happened."

"She has run away," blurted out Mrs. Potter.

"Run away! Where has she gone? Tell me where she is, I will go at once and fetch her back. I know she will come if I go after her."

"Alas!" said Mrs. Potter, "we do not know where she is. She disappeared as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up. We have tried in every way to get track of her, but have not been able to find any one who even saw her. We would think she had fallen into the river and drowned, or had gotten lost in the woods, but she took Black Dan with her—they both disappeared on the same night."

Mrs. Potter did not see fit to tell the Little Woman in Black the immediate cause of Nettie's flight or why she took Black Dan with her.

That evening the visitor excused herself early, after having barely tasted of the supper set before her. Upon entering the little room under the roof where she had spent so many happy hours with the girl whom she had come to love so tenderly, a flood of sadly sweet recollections rushed in upon her mind. With what fondness had she watched the deft, slender fingers weave their dainty webs of finest lace; with what pride and satisfaction had she taught her here the rudiments of an English education; how her heart had throbbed and thrilled as she saw the hard, pinched, angular features begin to soften and take on the regularity, the tint and charm which come to the face of a girl verging on the dawn of womanhood; how her

heart had leaped for joy as, under the touch of her own love and by the patience of her own instructions, she watched Nettie's quick mind, with leaps and bounds, expand into a broader intelligence and her naturally responsive heart burst from its old cynicism as a flower from its walls, and begin to pour forth the sweet fragrance of a new-born love. It was all over now, except the memory, which, however sweet, was embittered by apprehensions of what might remain in store for the impulsive and even headstrong girl in whom she had become so profoundly interested. Scarcely anything remained in the room to remind her of Nettie; but the associations were strong enough without such reminders. There was a little shelf in one corner on which the books she had brought to Nettie were wont to be kept. She looked at the shelf, —it was empty. A gleam of pleasure lighted up the sad face of the little woman. "She took them with her—good!" thought she.

Then she fell into a deep reverie and sat thinking for hours. Except for the rise and fall of her chest in breathing, and for an occasional profound sigh of which she was not conscious, she was as silent and motionless as if she had been a statue. And what were the thoughts of this lonely woman? Only she and God could tell. To none but Him in all the world would she have breathed some of her thoughts, and to Him only in sighs which He alone could hear. And as for Him, had He not given her the compassionate assurance that from the day when the sinning one shall turn from his ways, all the transgressions of his life shall be forgiven and shall not even be mentioned to him?

Long since, Mr. and Mrs. Potter had been sleeping in blissful forgetfulness that the woman up-stairs or any one else, for that matter, had a single grief or regret over which to brood. But before betaking themselves to bed, they sat beside the fireplace at least half an hour longer than was their wont, and the little woman was the theme of their conversation. What all they said, it boots it not to tell; but what they thought may be inferred from a remark or two which they were overheard to make.

"Do you think that can be possible?" said she.

"What else could make 'er take on thet way?" he replied.

"Since you mention it," said Mrs. Potter, "there are a good many things which look suspicious. If I knew it was true she shouldn't stay in the house another night."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Potter, and pulled off his boots with a grunt per boot and took himself off to bed.

Still the little woman up-stairs is silent and motionless. At length she stirs, draws a deep breath, looks about her hurriedly, takes from her bosom a dainty little watch, starts up in surprise to find that it lacks but ten minutes to one and then prepares for bed. Now she is robed in a spotless gown that comes to the floor, completely hiding the small white feet; the hair has been released from its fastenings and falls in rich profusion to her finger-tips—a wealth of dark-brown tresses but slightly sprinkled with silver threads. She is not above five feet in height and as slender as she could have been at the age of five-and-twenty,

though her age now cannot be less than forty. With her face turned in the opposite direction, and with her abundant hair falling over her chastely white gown, she appears as a young girl scarcely out of her teens; and when she turns about one can scarcely recognize in the large soft blue eyes, finely moulded features and intensely expressive face, the plain little woman commonly seen in a suit of black. Her ordinary and habitual dress was as complete a disguise as a mask could well have been. With her little shapely hands she quickly braids her glossy hair and her toilet for the night is complete.

Dropping upon her knees beside the open bed she remained long in earnest prayer, the silence of which was only broken by an occasional sigh or a heart-breaking sob. Whose cause was this devout soul pleading at the throne of divine mercy? Her own, no doubt, but mostly that of the little child she had so often clasped to her heart in that very room, who had so often fallen asleep in her bosom in that very bed while she, herself, remained awake and thought and prayed and wept. At length she arose, her face wet with tears, but with eyes aglow with celestial light. Tears often blind us, do they not? to the perishing objects of earth; but they are also, sometimes, the lenses through which we catch our first glimpses of God. She put out the light, went calmly to her bed and in a profound and restful sleep, was soon oblivious to all the cares and anxieties of earth. She had committed herself and the wandering child into the keeping of Him beyond whose watchful eye His children never stray.

She did not observe the next morning that Mrs. Potter eyed her much more keenly and curiously than ever before; nor that her treatment was cooler and more distant than it had been. Neither did she note when, immediately after breakfast she announced her purpose to depart, that the good lady of the house expressed neither surprise nor disappointment at her going, nor the hope that she might come again. Give yourself no uneasiness, dear Mrs. Potter. This little woman will never trouble you more. As you watch her with no very gentle feeling in your heart, while she disappears down the long lane towards the village two miles away, you are looking upon her for the last time. Henceforth her path and yours lie widely apart. She has gone as completely from your life and with as little regret as you are now dropped from this story.

In due time the little woman reached the neighboring village and by stage coach was taken to a railroad station some ten or a dozen miles away, which place she reached about noon. After a frugal meal at the only tavern of the place, she waited with apparent impatience for the train, which, though due at one o'clock did not arrive till nearly three. The train was bound for Cincinnati which place it did not reach until after it was quite dark. The Little Woman in Black quickly glided through the crowd at the station, boarded an old-fashioned street car drawn by mules and bound for the section of the city traversed by Chestnut street. After a ride of about thirty minutes, she alighted from the car, quickly passed up Chestnut street for two or three blocks, opened a gate and without ringing entered a neat little cottage. This

cottage was owned by a widow somewhat advanced in years, who rented to the little woman the up-stairs front room.

"Why, Marian!" exclaimed the widow, "I did not expect you back under two weeks."

"Nor did I intend to return so soon," replied the lodger.

"Well, I am right glad to see you, for when you are away I am so lonesome I can hardly live. Besides, Mrs. Bussey has been to see you about some lace for her daughter who is to be married in November. Mrs. Calkins and Miss Snyder have also been here on a similar errand. I took all their names and addresses and told them you would call to see them upon your return."

"You are very good, my dear Mrs. Forbes," the little woman replied. "And now if I may have a little something to eat, I will be greatly obliged to you; for I am both hungry and tired after my long journey."

"I don't see what you go out on these tiresome trips for, teaching other folks how to do this fine work, especially when there is such a demand for your work right here in the city. This is the busy season you know, and you ought to be here to meet the ladies who want your laces for weddings and such like."

This she said as she led the way into the neat little back room on the ground floor, which served the double purpose of kitchen and dining-room, the bare ashen floor of which was kept so clean and white that it appeared never to have seen a speck of dirt, while the little sideboard, dishes, silverware and other belongings were in perfect keeping with the room.

A light wholesome meal was quickly prepared, and eaten with relish, after which the little woman retired to her room on the second floor. She threw herself into a chair near a small table which stood in the middle of the room and sat for some time in silent thought. The tears soon began to course down her anxious face, when, bowing her head upon the table she gave way to an outburst of pent-up grief. When her paroxysm of weeping subsided, she raised her head, wiped the tears from her face and eyes which wore an expression of helpless uncertainty and bereavement.

"Oh, if I could but know where she is this night! This uncertainty will drive me mad. It would even be a relief to know that she is dead!"

As she gave voice to her anguish, her eyes fell upon a letter that had arrived during her absence. She took it up mechanically and held it in her hand as she arose and walked to and fro as one distracted. At length it occurred to her to look at the address. Recognizing the familiar handwriting of an old and cherished friend, she eagerly opened the letter and read.

"MY DEAR MARIAN:

"I have some news to tell you, which I think will be in the nature of a genuine surprise. The first day of our journey westward, we traveled about twenty miles and went into camp by the roadside on the bank of a small stream close to a little village. The next morning while I was preparing breakfast and Caleb was getting the horses ready to continue our journey, a girl of about sixteen years rode up to our camp so pale and worn that she could scarcely remain in her saddle. Being busy with my preparations for breakfast, I did not notice her until she startled me with the question, 'Please may I stop with you a little while, I am so tired?' Without waiting for an answer

she slid from her horse and stood looking up into my face with such an expression of entreaty that it would have been impossible for me to refuse her even if I had been disposed to do so. I said, 'Why, child, we will be on the road in half an hour; and you look as if you need to rest all day.' 'May I not go with you then?' she eagerly asked. 'Go with us!' I exclaimed. 'Why, we are going more than a thousand miles away!' 'O, do let me go with you!' she pleaded with tears in her eyes. I saw that there was something unusual about the girl and asked her who she was and where she came from. She told me that she was called Nettie Potter, but she did not think that was her real name, and that she had had some trouble with the family with whom she had lived. You may rest assured that when she gave the name of 'Nettie Potter,' I was all ears to hear what else she had to say. The upshot of it all was that we took her under our protection and shall see that she lacks for nothing. When we told her that we would take her as one of our family, she fairly danced for joy and seemed to forget all about her weariness and hunger. After she had eaten her breakfast, we prepared as comfortable a bed as we could among our effects in the 'Prairie Schooner'—as our covered wagon is called—in which she slept soundly until afternoon, notwithstanding the rocking and jolting on the way—her horse following in the rear of his own accord.

"My dear Marian, does it not seem strangely providential that this dear child should fall into our hands again after all these changeful years? Rest assured that all will be done for her that a mother could do; and unless a better home than we can give shall open to her, the best that we can ever call home shall be hers. She has been with us now over two weeks and we become more attached to her every day. When our Home, in which she was born, was burned and all we had was lost, Caleb thought, as we have already informed you, that, as we had devoted all these years to helping others, we would better go out west and try to accumulate something for our rapidly approaching old age. We had learned to love our Home and to see more and more with the passing years, the good results of our work; and my Marian, if we had done nothing more, the coming to us of our little girl has more than compensated for all we have suffered and lost.

"Of course I know you will be anxious to follow, but do not attempt such a thing at present; but wait until we find a location and are settled and then we will write you how to come. It would be exceedingly unpleasant if not perilous for you to attempt the trip by the stage system now in operation to the farther west. Caleb says a great line of railroad is being built across the desert, and it may be that by the time you are ready to come you can make most of the trip by rail. Be patient and confident; I will keep you informed about everything.

"This is a wild sort of life for a girl of sixteen; but from what you have told me of her, and from what I have seen of her since she came to us, I think it is just such a life as she will enjoy—indeed she seems as blithe and joyous as a bird escaped from its cage. She often tells me of 'A Little Woman in Black who used to come to our house,' as she says. She says her only regret in leaving is, that she will not see the little woman any more. The tears often fill her eyes when she speaks of you.

"Our health is splendid and we are, thus far, enjoying our journey immensely, though I presume we shall weary of it long before we reach its end. We think of you many times every day and always with loving thoughts.

"Sincerely your friend,
"MARY HARTMAN.

"P. S. I have not had an opportunity to write you till now. I will mail this at St. Louis, which place we expect to reach to-morrow or next day. Caleb says it will reach you sooner from there by water than it would from some inland point by stage.

"Good-bye!
"MARY."

Many times during the reading of this letter, did the eyes of the little woman become so blinded by tears that she could read no further; and at last when it was finished, she fell upon her knees and wept and prayed and thanked God with all her heart. When she arose, her face was almost radiant with joy.

CHAPTER VI

THE HUNTED BOY

In one of the great states of the Mississippi valley, was a small neighborhood which could scarcely be dignified as a town or village, though it was known far and near by the unromantic name of Stringtown. The best reason for this name was that it possessed only the dimension of length. The village stretched along the top of a ridge and consisted of one store, a blacksmith shop and wagon shop combined, a roadside tavern and perhaps a half dozen small houses rudely constructed of hewn logs.

A well-traveled road followed this ridge, descended into the heavily wooded bottom-lands of a creek or small river, passed through a long covered bridge and thence to the higher levels beyond.

On the side of the road on which Stringtown was built, the timber had been cleared away for gardens and small farms. The ground on the other side was covered with dense woods and sloped gradually to a deep ravine. A well-beaten path led through the woods to a large spring of clear, cool water which poured copiously from the side of the ravine some twenty rods from the roadside. The spring was wholly invisible from the road because of the dense woods in which it was concealed. Thither all the villagers went for water, for there was not a well or a cistern in all Stringtown.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon one autumn day when two boys, ten or a dozen years old, came to the spring for water. If these comers for water had found a boy there with a chubby face, curly hair, and a bran new pair of wings grown to great length from the places where the shoulder-blades should have been, they might have been frightened out of their wits. Instead of a cherub, however, they found a boy with bare feet, a pair of old and patched trousers hung to one suspender, a torn and soiled shirt and an old hat amply provided with means of ventilation. The boy's feet and face and garments were covered with dust as if he had come a long distance over a dusty road; and he was breathing rapidly and perspiring like one who had just fled from pursuit.

If the comers for water had been close observers, they would have noticed that the stranger's hands, while they bore evidences of rough, hard work, were nevertheless well formed and that his fingers were slender and tapering; that he held his head erect upon his well formed body; that though his face was dirty his features were regular and his skin smooth and white as it showed here and there through the dirt; that his white teeth were set in perfect regularity behind his rich red lips, while from beneath the long brown eyelashes and heavy eyebrows, a pair of large blue eyes shone through the dust which surrounded them like the deep blue sky through rifted clouds. The sunlight which fell through the branches of the trees full upon the stranger's head, gave a ruddy tint to his curly brown hair as it showed through the openings in his tattered hat. The boys would have sworn that his hair was red.

The boy did not appear to notice the comers for water, but kept glancing his large eyes uneasily here and there through the woods, as one who knows himself pursued. Suddenly he crouched behind the stump of a large tree, which had been broken off some ten or twelve feet above the ground. Following the direction of his gaze the boys saw a man leading a saddled horse through the woods and coming directly towards them. The man was about fifty years old—tall, stooped, low-browed. He had small, keen, black eyes set deep in his head, thin compressed lips, shaggy gray beard which had once been black and withal the look of one who is a coward before the strong and merciless towards the weak. Then the hunted boy seemed first to notice the other boys; and said to them hurriedly,

"Run away! Hide!"

They scampered off up the path towards the village as fast as their legs would carry them. On came the man with the horse, having in his right hand a hickory stick three or four feet long—half switch and half club. The boy had too often felt the weight of similar weapons in the hands of that man to leave any doubt as to the use intended now. Still the man came on—his eyes fixed upon the stump behind which the trembling boy was crouched; the boy meantime peered through some vines which had attached themselves to the decaying stump and hung in festoons from its side, keeping his eyes on the dismounted horseman, who seemed to be looking straight through the tree and seeing what was hidden behind it. The boy thought to leave his hiding-place and run for his life, but it

was too late. When the horseman was within a dozen yards of the stump behind which the boy had taken refuge, the lad, thinking himself discovered, was on the point of stepping out from behind the tree and throwing himself upon the mercy of the man (if indeed he could be said to have had any mercy); but at that instant he noticed that the man's eyes were fixed upon something beyond the stump and did not see him at all. The boy crouched still closer to the earth and slipped noiselessly around the stump so as to keep on the side opposite the man. The latter passed by, took a drink at the spring, allowed his horse to drink, struck into the path and disappeared.

The youth, thinking that the boys might betray his whereabouts, glided from his retreat, concealed himself in a tangle of brush some distance away but in sight of the spring, and waited developments. The two boys soon reappeared. Reassured, the lad came out from his hiding-place. Now, when a new boy makes his appearance in a community, the natives do one of two things,—either pick a quarrel forthwith or make friends with the newcomer. In this case they were too curious to pick a quarrel.

The fugitive told the boys frankly his situation. He was an orphan, and for the last four years or more had been compelled to live with this man whom they had just seen and whose name was Smith. The man had treated him with the greatest cruelty; had, from the time he was seven years old, required him to work early and late at all kinds of farm-work, ordering him out of bed before it was light enough to see and keeping him at his toil long after it was dark. And, what

was immeasurably worse, the man had heaped upon him such abuse both by tongue and by the lash, that he could no longer endure it. It was for these reasons that he was fleeing from his heartless tormentor.

"Come with me. Tell my mother about it," said the older boy.

The woman listened with an earnest face and at times with moistened eye to the frank, straightforward story of the boy.

"How long since you had anything to eat, my boy?" she asked.

"Not since early this morning, ma'am."

"Poor child!" she murmured, and at once set about preparing him something to eat. Meantime she had provided him with a basin of water and a cake of soap. She left her cooking occasionally to assist the lad in his ablutions. When at last all the dirt was removed and his fine face shone out smooth, white and handsome, this mother gathered the little fellow into her arms and hugged and kissed him, very much to his confusion and delight. When had any kind-hearted woman put her arms about him before? When had any woman, in an outburst of motherhood, imprinted upon his lips and brow such kisses of affection as might have been intended for her own boy? This mother's caresses awakened recollections which had laid buried in his memory from his earliest childhood; and in that moment, the vision of another rose before him and he remembered for the first time in many a day the arms that should embrace him no more, the kisses he should never again receive. The boy was looking up into the woman's face, his large

blue eyes filled with tears while the word mother trembled upon his lips.

The hostess hastened the preparation of the boy's repast. When had such a meal been placed at his disposal! A liberal slice of broiled ham, two fried eggs, some sweet, choice butter and bread, and for a beverage, a bowl of deliciously cool sweet milk from which the cream had not been removed.

There is no one else in this world who can eat like a well-regulated, growing boy; and it goes without saying that our little stranger did ample justice to this excellent and wholesome repast; while his new-found friend sat by with a glowing face, helping him to this and that, and watching him eat as if every bite the hungry boy took tasted good in her own mouth. Her boy had been stationed out in the front yard with instructions to keep watch, and to report the approach of any man on horseback. The stranger lad had just finished his meal when the son ran in and cried,

"He's coming! He's coming!"

"Here," said the woman to the boy, "hide in this corner and keep perfectly quiet."

She told her own boy to go out into the back yard and remain there until called. Then taking up some sewing, she sat down in a chair near the front door which stood wide open and began to sew with all her might. Straight to her front gate came the horseman. After attracting her attention and describing the boy she had just fed, he asked the pointed question whether or not she had seen anything of him. She instantly replied,

"I have not seen him!"

Did this good woman lie? Possibly. If so, then

when the great books are opened and out of them men are judged according to the deeds done in the body, the lie of this pious soul, told to a cruel, passionate man to protect an innocent and hunted child, will doubtless be found in the credit column of the account which shall determine her final destiny! But did she lie? That she told an intentional untruth is certain. That she purposely deceived cannot be disputed or even doubted. But is all intentional deception lying? Does the patriotic general who purposely deceives his adversary and thereby gains an advantage, lie? We applaud such deception and call it strategy. Was it lying for the old prophet in Israel to say to the Syrians at Dothan, when he knew that they were turning heaven and earth to find him, "Follow me and I will show you whom ye seek," and then lead them supernaturally blindfolded into the camp of the king of Israel and make them prisoners of war? He certainly deceived them with great deliberation and success. But even the Rev. Augustus Topliff himself would scarcely contend that the prophet lied by inspiration. At all events, the short sentence of little words "I have not seen him!" threw the boy-hunter off the scent and started him in another direction.

After the man had gone, the pursued boy came out from his hiding and announced his purpose to resume his journey. His benefactress sought to dissuade him, but he was firm in his purpose to go. When she saw that he was determined to set out, she looked first at the boy and then at a chest upon which were neatly folded some quilts, sheets and other bedclothing. It was evident that she entertained some purpose that

was in conflict with her emotions. The conflict was sharp, but brief.

"Wait a moment," said she; and going over to the chest, she removed the bedclothing and opened it. All the while her face was flushed and her hands trembled as if she were about to uncover and look upon the face of one departed. She got down upon her knees beside the open chest and began to take out some garments which might have belonged to a boy ten or a dozen years old. These she laid tenderly upon a chair. The poor woman could control her feelings no longer. Burying her face in the clothing, she burst into a flood of tears and sobbed out her unutterable grief for her own dear boy who had, but a few months before, left her silently and unpursued, never to return. The garments were plain and partly worn, but whole and clean. After the torrent of her grief had spent its force, she took up the clothes, went over and sat down beside the boy.

"These were the clothes of my own precious Albert," she said. "He has gone from this our poor earthly home to our home in heaven. It is my wish, as I know it would be his, that you take them and wear them. I have sought to do for you to-day as nearly as possible, what your mother would do if she were here. I want you to take these clothes and wear them, remembering that I shall always think of you and pray for you."

Accordingly the change was made and the stranger stood ready to take his departure. When the mother looked upon him, clad in the familiar garments,—his face flushed and his lustrous eyes so bright, she once

more gathered the boy into her arms and pressed him to her heart. It was easy to imagine that she believed her own boy, who in her dreams had so often returned to her, had at last really come and after spending an hour in his old earthly home was about to leave again, and that she was bidding him a fond good-bye.

"You have not told me your name," she said.

"My name is Albert. They call me Albert Smith,—that is the name of the man I have lived with; but my real name is Albert Armby."

When the boy told her his name was Albert, the tears again filled her eyes.

"Good-bye, Albert. God bless and keep you!"

And so the mother and the boy parted; but in the brief hour during which he had been in her humble home, she had impressed her own spirit upon the lad so deeply as to influence, in some measure, his whole future life.

The boy resumed his journey. He was no longer discouraged, but buoyant, hopeful, happy. He traversed the winding road past the village, descended into the wooded bottom-land, passed through the covered bridge, ascended the long embankment on the other side to the level country which was also heavily wooded. He felt that it was not yet safe to follow the main road. He took, therefore, the first diverging road that bore evidence of being a public highway. After he had gone some distance, it became evident to him that the road he had chosen was but little used. It was, in fact, but a devious way leading through the dense woods—whither? He knew not and cared but little. His only aim was to put himself beyond the

reach of the one person in all the world whom he both feared and hated.

By this time the sun had disappeared and night was at hand. Onward the boy still pushed his way. Since leaving the main road, he had not seen a human being nor passed a human dwelling. It was dark. The stars could be seen through the branches of the tall trees. It occurred to him that maybe they were the eyes of God keeping watch over him in response to the prayers of the good woman from whose home he had so recently come. It was the only prayer he remembered ever to have heard any one make for him. As he had no doubt at all about its being answered, he felt no fear.

At length he heard the barking of dogs in the direction he was traveling. He quickened his pace. Soon he heard the lowing of cattle and knew that he was approaching a farmhouse. The horizon began to grow lighter, the forest became less dense, and soon he emerged from the woods and found himself at the margin of a treeless prairie which spread out before him like a sea.

But a short distance away was a well-built farmhouse, while immediately in front of him bellowed two immense hounds. The boy dared not run, but stood motionless until the farmer, aroused by the increasing din, emerged from the house.

"Stop your roaring there, Drum! Be still, Bugle! Be off there and keep quiet, you scoundrels!" cried the farmer, half threatening and half coaxing—as if angry and still in tones of affection. The fact is this pioneer farmer loved his only child dearly, and also loved his

great, long-eared sagacious hounds scarcely less. He had given them these peculiar names because of the roar of the one and the long bugle-like note of the other when on the trail of a deer or a fox. After he had spoken to them, they appeared to pay no more attention to the boy, but ran up to their master and in all manner of dog language, showed their affection for him and begged for some token of recognition.

"Well, my boy," said the farmer, "where did you come from? But you need not answer that question now. Come into the house, and you can tell me about yourself later on. You need not be afraid of the dogs now. Since I have asked you into the house, if all the wolves in these woods were after you, they would not get at you until they had used up old Drum and Bugle, I reckon; and you may bet that by that time there would be a lot of them used up."

This he said as he led the way into the house. In those days of cordial hospitality one did not need to ask the second time, or even the first, for shelter. While modern society and crowded populations bring their advantages and enjoyments, they rob us of some of the choicest pleasures and privileges of the earlier days. Who that remembers, can ever forget the old-fashioned cordiality with which even the stranger was entertained in the good old days when there were no hotels, and when the wayside inns or taverns were few and far between? There was need then, such as no longer exists, for hospitality. While there are few indeed who would wish to return to those times, one cannot but feel that our modern civilization, with all the advantages it brings, has left behind some choice

old blessings,—just as the passing years have brought us many new and valued friends, but have also left in the past some dear, dear friends whose loss we shall never cease to mourn.

The house into which Albert was conducted was built of large logs hewn to present broad flat surfaces within and without and notched together at the corners. The openings between the logs were filled with chinks and covered over with mortar which came out flush with the edges, making an even surface throughout. The inside was whitewashed, and looked as clean and wholesome as one could desire. The oaken floors were bare, but scrubbed and cleaned until they fairly shone under the light of the bright fire which blazed in the ample fireplace in one end of the room. A plump, bright-faced woman, neat as a new pin, with clean white apron on, her sleeves turned back to her elbows, showing a pair of round dimpled arms tapering to small wrists and hands, was busy washing the supper dishes. In this she was assisted by a ten-year-old girl the exact image of her mother. A large good-natured cat lay toasting on a mat before the open fire.

"Mother," said the farmer, "here is a boy that has had no supper."

The wife looked at the boy, greeted him with a cheerful smile, and said,

"You must have come a long way. Sit down and rest yourself. We will have some supper for you directly."

In a few minutes he was doing ample justice to some choice venison broiled before the open fire, a

dish of baked apples with an accompaniment of excellent cake and a bowl of milk fresh from the milk-house outside. The only trouble Albert had at all with his supper was the consciousness that the pretty, plump ten-year-old girl who had seated herself in a corner by the fire was casting occasional glances at him from her sparkling eyes, said glances mingled in about equal parts of curiosity and admiration. After he had finished his supper, he was given a chair beside the fireplace, and greatly fatigued with his long journey, was soon fast asleep in the house of his friends. O, sweet and dreamless sleep of weary childhood! No driving to late and early tasks too severe for much older and stronger hands! No harsh and profane epithets from a heartless taskmaster whose oaths and blows alike fall upon the fatherless and motherless boy! No relentless pursuer with cudgel in hand, breathing the chagrin and anger he longed to vent in curses and blows upon the child who had eluded his grasp! None of these things—neither the wrongs and sufferings of the past nor the infinitely greater wrongs and sufferings of the future, disturbed him now. He sat beside a glowing fire in the house of a strange family, whose three members looked in mingled pity and admiration upon the clear bright face of the sleeping boy. A bed was soon prepared for him in which he was cozily tucked away without becoming fairly awake.

CHAPTER VII

FROM YOUTH TO MANHOOD

ALBERT slept so soundly that he did not awake until the dawn of the next day brought the noise of lowing cattle, the barking of dogs, and the sound of footsteps and voices in the room below. It was some time after he awoke ere he could recall the events which had led to his present situation. When at last he succeeded in recalling the incidents of the day before, he bounced out of bed, quickly dressed himself and, by a narrow stairway, descended to the room below. Here he was greeted by a smile and a cheery "good-morning, Albert" from the woman, and by a coy and furtive glance from the bright eyes of the pretty daughter.

"Show Albert the wash-basin and give him a clean towel, Jennie," added the mother.

After the boy had performed his morning ablutions, he bounded out into the yard where the long-eared hounds began an uproarious duet.

"Drum! Bugle!" exclaimed the boy as he snapped his fingers at the hounds. In an instant they were leaping and playing about him in a familiar romp. There seems to be some subtle kinship or fraternity between a healthy and right-minded boy and an intelligent and well disposed dog. Certain it is that Albert and Drum and Bugle, on this brief acquaintance, had formed a triumvirate of most excellent friends. Mr. Bascomb was singing away with a not very dis-

cordant voice while busily feeding his stock. He knew nothing of Albert's presence until that little gentleman startled him with,

"Good-morning, Mr. Bascomb! Can't I help you with your chores?"

"Good-morning, my little man! How did you know my name is Bascomb?"

"Your wife told me," replied Albert, the little fibber. Jennie had told him when she gave him the wash-basin and the towel. "Can't I help you, Mr. Bascomb?"

"Why, I am nearly through and breakfast will be ready in a minute. What can you do?"

"I can do anything. I can feed and curry horses, feed cattle and hogs, plow, help with the hay and everything."

"Help with the hay and plow!" exclaimed the farmer. "You are not big enough nor strong enough for such hard work."

"I didn't pitch the hay to the top of the load, but I had my fork and stayed on top and loaded the hay on the wagon and then mowed it away in the haymow; and as for plowing, I have plowed for the last four seasons."

Mr. Bascomb looked at the slightly built twelve year old boy for a full half minute without saying a word, —all the while mentally damning the man who would put a mere child to such heavy and exhausting tasks. Albert, accustomed to being suspicioned, construed the man's silence into distrust of his word.

"O," said he, coloring, "it is the truth. I can show you if you have any work of that kind to do."

"I was not doubting you, my boy," said Mr. Bascomb. "I was only wondering that any one should be so hard-hearted as to give a mere child such work to do. Mother is calling us to breakfast,—let us go in and see if she has anything good to eat."

Mr. Bascomb sat at the head of the table, his wife at the foot, the two young people at the sides, facing each other. During the morning meal a lively conversation was kept up, especially by the farmer. The miserable old saying that "children should be seen, not heard," must have been coined by some cynical old misanthrope of whom our good friend Bascomb had never heard; for he sought by his good-natured arts to bring the children out and interest them in the conversation. But they were too conscious of each other's presence to do little more than blush and pretend not to see each other.

When breakfast was finished, they sat about the table for a while, the kind-hearted farmer wishing to find out something of the boy's history without seeming to be too inquisitive.

"Our table has been a little one-sided, mother," said he to his wife with a sly nod towards his daughter. "They even it up finely, eh?" with another nod first at one and then at the other of the children.

"I'll lay a wager that there are not two years between their ages. How much older are you than Jennie, Albert?"

"I do not know how old she is," answered Albert with a blush.

"That's so," said the father. "Let's see—she will be fourteen in a week or two."

"Papa, you know that's a story! I won't be eleven 'til next March," said Jennie, half vexed at her father's misstatement.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Mr. Bascomb, "I knew I would get the bridle off her tongue. Now, Mr. Albert, you know how old she is and I am going to make a guess that you are a year and a half older. How nearly am I right, eh?"

"I don't know just how old I am," said Albert.

"Then," said the man a little more soberly, "your parents must have died when you were very young."

"I don't remember ever to have seen my father, and until yesterday I thought I had never seen my mother; but a good woman made me think of her. I do not know how my mother looked, only I know she was very good."

"I take it, my lad, that you have had a rather tough time of it since your parents died. Tell me about it, —maybe I can help you a little."

Albert was encouraged by the kindly interest of the man and felt that Mr. Bascomb was a friend in whom he could safely rely.

"Well," said he, "when I was very little my father and mother died and I was given to a Mr. and Mrs. Armby to raise. That was in Ohio. Soon after, they moved to Southern Illinois. They were very good to me. About four years ago, Mr. Armby died and Mrs. Armby was too poor to take care of me. So I was sent to live with a man by the name of Smith. His wife was Mr. Armby's sister. Well, he made me do awful hard work. I had to get up before daylight of winters and make the fires and then work about the

stables till breakfast. At night it took me till away after dark to get my chores done."

"Didn't he have any one to help you,—no hired man?"

"No, sir; him and me done it all. I did not care so much for the work, if he had not beat me and swore at me and called me bad names. It got so bad at last that I couldn't stand it any longer."

The boy's face flushed and his lips trembled as he concluded his statement. The little fellow had won the confidence and sympathy of every member of the Bascomb family. A tear stood in Mrs. Bascomb's eyes; Mr. Bascomb bent upon the boy a look of mingled pity and indignation, while little Jennie looked first at her father and then at her mother and then at the boy, wondering what it all meant.

"I don't blame you, my boy,—you did right to leave him," said Bascomb, earnestly. "I only wonder that you stood it as long as you did."

Albert had, indeed, endured his lot with a commendable degree of fortitude and patience. But there is such a thing as crowding a submissive dog to a point where he shows his teeth, growls ominously and, in the last extreme, turns savagely upon his merciless master. Many times after having submitted to a brutal flogging, Albert had shown his teeth, so to speak, (always of course when at a safe distance) growled beneath his breath, shaken his head defiantly, clenched his little fists, swelled up with wrathful indignation and threatened vengeance upon his cruel tormentor. But what would such a little scrap of humanity have been in the hands of an angry and vin-

dictive man? Matters finally reached a pass where the little fellow felt that either he must fly or do something desperate.

"How did you manage to get away from him?" asked Mr. Bascomb.

"Well, you see, it was this way: he had spent the day in town. He always came home tipsy and cross. He was mad at me because I didn't do as much work as he thought I should. So after supper he took me out into the back yard with a hickory withe in his hand and swore he would whip me within an inch of my life. To keep him from hurting me too much I——"

"Decided to filibuster, eh?"

"Yes, I reckon that's it. I didn't get scared, but——"

"Kept as cool and alert as an Indian, did you?"

"Yes, sir. I dodged, jumped into the air, fell flat upon the ground and bounded up like a rubber ball and everything, so that he didn't hit me more than once out of a dozen times. You see it was dark and he was tipsy and couldn't see where to strike. He stumbled and lunged about and actually fell sprawling to the ground two or three times. It was fun to me and I couldn't help giggling out when he went tumbling to the grass. He gave it up after awhile and went into the house swearing, and puffing for breath. I knew I would catch it the next time——"

"And you didn't propose to give him another chance. But I don't see how you managed to give him the slip."

"Well, I knew that he and his wife were going to

spend the next night at a neighbor's about three miles away and wouldn't get home till late in the forenoon. They left me and two other children at home. Early the next morning I started and traveled as fast as I could till nearly two o'clock. I had just crossed the big prairie on the other side of Stringtown and was nearly through the long lane that leads up to the woods. I looked back and saw Smith on horseback enter the other end of the lane. I broke into a run and instead of following the road after leaving the lane, I plunged into the woods. He came pretty near catching me, and would have anyhow if it had not been for the kind woman I spoke of. She took me into her house, gave me something to eat and hid me."

"Who was the woman at Stringtown?" asked Mr. Bascomb.

"Mrs. Norton was her name. She also gave me some clean clothes—those I had were ragged and dirty."

When Albert mentioned the name of Mrs. Norton, the farmer's face became serious enough while a tear stole down the cheek of his wife.

"She did right," said Mr. Bascomb. "Mrs. Norton is my sister,—we call her Jane. Our little girl is named after her, but we foolishly call her Jennie. About a month ago she lost her own boy, whose name was Albert; and I'm afraid she will never get over her trouble. She is one of the best women God ever let live!"

"I believe it," said Albert earnestly.

The conversation had taken a much more serious turn than was usual at the Bascomb table. The

farmer shook off the feeling of sadness that had crept over his spirits, and in quite a jovial manner said to Albert,

"By the way, you mustn't think that Jennie has no tongue; for between you and me, if you or some other stranger were not here, she would chatter away so fast that I would have to watch my chances to get in a word edgewise."

Albert took up his cap,—one Mrs. Norton had given him, and after thanking Mr. and Mrs. Bascomb for their kindness, was about to resume his journey.

"Where are you going, Albert?" inquired Mr. Bascomb.

"I don't know."

"Don't know! Have you no relatives? No brothers or sisters?"

"None that I know of," said the boy.

"Wait a moment," said the farmer. He and his wife went aside and talked together a minute or two. While Albert heard not a word of their conversation, he had no doubt it related to him. When they returned to where Albert stood, cap in hand, Mr. Bascomb said,

"I think it would be better, my boy, for you to stay here a few days. It don't seem to mother and me that it is the best thing for you to start out this morning not knowing where you are to go. This is a quiet, out-of-the-way place, and it isn't likely that Smith will ever put in his appearance here; and if he should, I would set the hounds on him, by George I would!"

"I would be glad to stay if you will only let me help you, for I haven't any money to pay."

"Never mind about money," said the liberal-souled farmer. "You can help mother by bringing water from the spring, fetching in the light wood and by any other little errands you can do for her."

"O, I can do all that and help you too," said Albert.

Albert was greatly pleased at the prospect of staying awhile in this home where there was so much sunshine. The open-faced and open-hearted farmer had fully won his confidence; Mrs. Bascomb while, for a wonder, less talkative than her husband, had not only a sweet, benignant face, but a sweet temper also; and little Jennie—well, it is not the purpose of this story to contrive a love-match between these children—not because they are too young, for if everybody's experience and observation does not deceive him, boys of twelve and even younger, have their sweethearts, and girls not older than Jennie Bascomb have their beaux, just as well as those who are twice as old. They love just as hard and act just as foolishly about it sometimes as boys and girls of much riper years. It may not last as long—and it may last longer—than with people who are expected to be more constant than children; but while it does last it is just as genuine and hurts just as hard as with those who are no longer children except in actions. While Albert and Jennie did not fall in love otherwise than children do, and while they were never married to each other nor even thought of such a thing, perhaps, Jennie's pretty face and bright brown eyes were by no means the least

among the many attractions making it easy to accept Mr. Bascomb's invitation.

The days passed pleasantly and swiftly by. Albert knew how to make himself useful, not only to Mrs. Bascomb, but to her husband as well. There was not a lazy drop of blood in his body. During the last four years and over, he had been subjected to the atrophying process of repression. If he had continued to submit to it, he must have broken down both in body and mind, and degenerated into a stunted imbecile. Not so in the home of his friend Perry Bascomb. That good and sensible man had unlocked the door of the cage, thrown the key to the winds, and by his actions said, "Go in and out, my bird, as you will!"

Albert was like a colt the door of whose stable had been left open; and he went joyously capering all over the place and kicking up his heels like mad,—for, let it be remembered, this little fellow was a boy; yet he had in him the elements of which a noble man is made. Mr. and Mrs. Bascomb having completely won his confidence and gratitude, their slightest wish was to him a law more potent than all the don'ts and musts and such like terms in the extensive vocabulary of tyranny.

Ere he was aware of it, a week had slipped away; but not a word had been said to him about his going, or staying longer. Likewise two, three, nearly four weeks passed without any reference to his future plans. The nearest town of any note—the nearest railroad point—was Vandalia, some twenty-five miles away. Thither Mr. Bascomb was in the habit of going at least twice a year, and oftener when necessity re-

quired, to market his produce and lay in such supplies as he did not raise on the farm.

"I am going to town to-morrow, Albert," said he one night just before retiring to bed. "I will probably start before you are up and may be gone over night. I leave the farm in your care. The main thing is to feed the stock and keep an eye on things in general."

Upon the farmer's return from town, among the many other things he brought back with him, was a complete outfit of winter clothing for a lad about twelve years old, and a set of school books, etc., suited to a boy of Albert's attainments.

"The winter school will open a week from Monday," said Bascomb; and these were the only words that gentleman had said in Albert's presence, or that he ever said to him which had the remotest connection with his stay in the good man's home.

It is not necessary to follow from this time on the footsteps of this little waif from youth to manhood. It has seemed important however to trace somewhat in detail, the incidents connected with his escape from purgatory and his entrance into paradise, as it seemed to him. For the next sixteen years, his life, while interesting enough, had not in it the dramatic element to warrant its minute portrayal. It will be sufficient to say, that Bascomb's home was his home until he reached mature manhood and struck out to make a future for himself. Mr. and Mrs. Bascomb and Jennie were to him father and mother and sister in everything except blood.

His foster parents, though he was never formally

adopted by them, soon discovered that he possessed unusual aptitude for learning. When the teachers of their rural school could teach him nothing more, he was sent to the academy at Vandalia and later to the college at Labanon where he took high rank as a student, graduating with the honor of valedictorian. His accomplishments were such as peculiarly to qualify him for this honor. He had made a specialty of the study of the arts of speech, and in addition to a mind rarely enriched with the forms of expression found in the world's best literature, he possessed a fervid temperament, a vivid imagination, keen perceptions and, strange to say, perfect self-possession. Oratory was as natural to Albert Armby as music to the nightingale.

After the completion of his college course, he took a professional course at Ann Arbor and established himself in the practice of law in the capital city of his state. In a surprisingly short time he had won to himself a thriving clientage and a prosperous position among his fellow-citizens. He was in great demand far and near where captivating eloquence was desired. On the platform, at the hustings, on the stump and on occasions of public ceremony, he was the first to be invited to speak. Already, though less than thirty years old, his friends—and they were many—were predicting for him a future replete with distinguished honors.

One of those mysterious waves of religious influence swept over the city in which he lived, and reached the mind and heart of Albert Armby; when, to the astonishment of every one, the honors and prospects which stood beckoning him in the near future were

waved aside, and bowing humbly at the shrine of religion, he took upon himself the obligations and, as he believed, the greater honors of the Christian ministry.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CITY OF X——

FAR away amid the wild grandeur of the Rocky Mountains stretches a little valley of almost entrancing beauty. It is about twenty miles wide, a hundred miles long and of inexhaustible fertility. Because of the lofty mountain ranges between which it lies, it appears not more than an hour's walk from one side to the other. Through its entire length flows a slender little river which seems, when viewed from the mountain heights, as a silvery ribbon woven amid the fields, orchards and groves with which the valley abounds. Any one viewing this valley, these mountains and the overarching sky by night, might easily imagine himself standing at the entrance to a magnificent avenue, the mountain ranges massive tiers of columns supporting a vast elongated dome frescoed in blue, flooded with a silvery light and jeweled with stars.

At the head of this valley, nestled the sleepy little old town of X—— with its cluster of adobe houses. The site for a city was almost ideal, being at the base of a lofty mountain range and sloping gently from the foot-hills down into the edge of the fertile valley. The city itself was admirably planned, provision having been made for broad and regular streets, ample sites for public buildings and an extensive system of

parks and driveways. To the north and west were natural terraces from fifty to a hundred feet high and an average width of perhaps three-quarters of a mile, forming ideal sites for the better class of residences.

The city of X—— was only waiting for the galvanic touch of some great enterprise to awaken it into a new and active life. This better day was at hand. The transcontinental lines of railway soon penetrated to the isolated town, and the news of the discovery of rich deposits of silver and gold amid its surrounding mountains went abroad. From all parts of the continent and from lands across the sea, a new population poured into the valley, swarmed the streets of the old town, and threaded the mountain fastnesses in search of the precious metals. Abundant capital came with the people. New business blocks, handsome dwellings, church edifices, school and other public buildings arose like magic; and lo! in a few brief years the sleepy old town with its adobe houses had vanished, and a new, modern, wide-awake and thriving city had taken its place.

In the influx, all sorts of people came—the poor to escape from his poverty and the rich to increase his wealth; the merchant with his wares, the capitalist looking for profitable investment; the speculator in search of his victim, the mechanic to reconstruct the torpid town and transform it into a modern city; the lawyer, the doctor and he of the other learned professions to ply his arts and enrich his purse; the young man and the young woman fresh from the halls of learning came to grow up with the country. The devil also came in the garb of the gambler, the thug

and the courtesan. There was more brain, more energy, more real ability and more deviltry to the square inch in the new city of X—— than any other city on the continent. There were honorables enough to have filled half a dozen legislatures of moderate size; there were judges enough to have supplied the benches of almost any number of courts; there were statesmen enough to have filled all vacancies, and more too, in both houses of the national congress, while there was no great scarcity of material out of which the average president might have been made.

Daily newspapers, morning and evening, multiplied until it certainly was no fault of the editors if the people were not aware of everything that was going on and a great deal besides.

Where there was so much ability there was also a corresponding degree of ambition; and while there was said to be room at the top, everybody was determined to reach the coveted place, even if he had to clamber over the prostrate form of some fellow hustler. Inasmuch, however, as there was not room enough at the top for everybody at the same time, the disappointed many formed themselves into all sorts of cliques and combinations, offensive and defensive, the main purposes of which were, to get the other fellow down from the top and hoist one, and all had that been possible, of their own number into the coveted vacancy.

The churches shared in the general prosperity, and also, it must be confessed, in the spirit of rivalry which they had caught, perhaps by contagion, from the less godly portion of the community. From being

so weak, poor and illy attended under the old régime, they found themselves augmented, strengthened and enriched by the inpouring newcomers. The houses of worship could not contain the crowds that flocked to them on the Sabbath day. The old buildings had to be enlarged and new ones erected to hive the swarms that had flown to this new land in search of fields from which to gather in the honey. And there was no small amount of jingling of bells, and the rattling of pans and other fuss and noise—most of it dignified and decorous of course—by the partisans of the different churches to induce the hesitating bees to find their way into their respective hives.

It was to this place that the Rev. Augustus Topliff came when he left the quiet little city in southern Ohio where he was the energetic and popular pastor of one of the most prominent churches, in order to become the superintendent of the interests of his denomination in a far-away and isolated mission field. He was by this time approaching fifty years of age. During his twenty years of residence here, his magnificent physique, his stentorian voice and his long hair had rendered him immensely popular with the frontier population of those early years. He was a mighty man among them, a Boanerges, a son of thunder. In the course of a few years, he succeeded, through some of his friends in the east, in inducing the Tobyville College to confer upon him the degree of Doctor in Divinity. While those who were best acquainted with his scholastic attainments winked at each other when the degree was conferred; and while it is almost certain that he could not read his diploma

after it was granted, he succeeded in making it universally known among the people of his new field, very much to the increase of his popularity and to the aggravation of his own vanity; for, while he was as sanctimonious as a Pharisee he was as vain as a peacock.

Through the influence of some of his old college chums who had come out west to grow up with the country, Albert Armby, though yet so young and without extended experience, was invited to become the pastor of Trinity—one of the strongest churches in the city of X——. After much anxious thought and hesitation he finally accepted and came on to enter upon his duties.

It is felt to be an important occasion when a new minister appears before his people for the first time. Armby wisely determined that at his first service he would give his people a plain, simple inaugural address; but carried away by his glowing description of the possibilities of usefulness by their united efforts, he made a deeper and more favorable impression than he intended or desired.

After the services, the people gathered about him to extend their cordial welcome. He felt a slight pull at his sleeve and heard a pleasant voice at his side say,

"Mr. Armby, will you come home with me to dinner?"

Turning to see whose voice it was, he found himself facing a man a little beyond middle life, of fine form and commanding presence. While a spirit of genial cordiality shone from his handsome face, there was a gravity in his countenance and a dignity in his bearing, born of a long-continued sense of responsibility.

"This is Colonel Blakeslee, Mr. Armby," said one of the ladies.

"It is but a short distance and I have sent the carriage on with my daughter, thinking you would enjoy the walk with me, this fine day."

"I thank you, Colonel, and will be glad to go with you."

The two men walked leisurely to the elegant Blakeslee mansion and were met in the reception-hall by Evelyn Blakeslee, the Colonel's only child. There were no other members of the family, the Colonel's wife having died when Evelyn was a baby.

"Mr. Armby, this is my daughter."

Evelyn gave her hand to the young minister in cordial welcome, while she lifted to his face her great expressive eyes. If an electric current had thrilled his nerves, he would not have felt the shock more sensibly than he felt the strange thrill of mingled pain and pleasure sent through his whole being by this look from Evelyn Blakeslee. She dropped her eyes almost instantly, while the blood mantled to her face in crimson blushes. Each was conscious of the same emotions while ignorant of the feelings of the other. It was fortunate for these young people, that Colonel Blakeslee's attention happened to be directed elsewhere just at that moment; otherwise their mutual confusion could not have escaped his observation.

Evelyn Blakeslee would have attracted attention in the midst of a multitude. While she was tall and rather slender, there was a symmetry, a grace and compactness about her form which indicated a perfectly developed womanhood.

Her face was in perfect harmony with her exquisite physique. Her skin was neither light nor dark; but there was at once a richness and delicacy in her complexion which showed the blood that coursed through her veins to be as pure as the thoughts of her mind and the emotions of her heart.

Her great brown eyes shone with a lustre and warmth which seemed to penetrate to the very core of one's being and to set his heart on fire. Not only did they emphasize the richness of her physical life, but also revealed an indwelling soul of rare nobility.

Albert Armby had met many women, but never one who impressed him so profoundly. Colonel Blakeslee sat at the head of the table, Evelyn at the foot, with Albert between them. The dinner was thoroughly enjoyed; but the young people did not risk another meeting of their eyes.

After an hour's delightful social intercourse with the Colonel and Evelyn, Armby took his leave; but his thoughts loitered behind, loth to leave the place where he had spent so enchanting an hour.

As he walked leisurely down the broad and amply shaded street, he felt himself the most fortunate of men.

"Surely," said he to himself, "the lines have fallen to me in pleasant places!"

During the afternoon he found his mind constantly returning to Colonel Blakeslee and his charming daughter. Gradually the Colonel was relegated to the background of Albert's thoughts and Evelyn came to fill the whole perspective of his mental vision.

It is stated that ministers of the highly wrought,

oratorical temperament find it difficult to sleep after the strain upon their nervous and sympathetic force incident to the duties and responsibilities of the Sabbath. Certain it is that Armby spent nearly the whole night of his first Sunday in X—— in a vain endeavor to compose himself to sleep. During the restless hours of the night, a thousand disconnected and taunting fancies thronged his brain. Mingled with all his waking dreams was the pleasing image of Evelyn Blakeslee. On the succeeding days of the week he tried to pursue his studies; but his book would scarcely be opened when Eyelyn's great brown eyes would look up to him from the page.

About mid-week he began to get nervous lest he should come to the Sabbath unprepared for the pulpit. With resolute will he at length seated himself at his desk to make the necessary preparation. While he sat with waiting pen, the blushing face of Evelyn Blakeslee emerged from the blank paper on which his eyes were resting and then vanished as quickly as it came.

A hundred themes presented themselves, each in its turn to be thrust aside as unwelcome to eclipse a face of so much life and beauty. At length these words stood out in golden letters before his mind:

"WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US!"

The theme, Love the Causative Force of the Universe, found a mind and heart ripe for its reception. So absorbed did Armby become, that he scarcely took time to eat or sleep until his sermon was completed; and then he could hardly wait for the coming Sab-

bath, so eager was he to deliver his message to the people.

And Evelyn? From the moment when her eyes first met those of Albert Armby, she conducted herself towards him with a reserve that bordered upon coldness. Nevertheless, more than once during that first Sunday afternoon she became thoroughly out of patience with herself because she was unable to dismiss the young minister from her mind.

After she had dressed herself for bed that night, she was standing before her mirror braiding her hair. She met her own eyes in the glass, and remembering her meeting with Armby, her blood mantled in crimson to her face and she turned away in vexed confusion.

The next Sunday came. Evelyn was the leading soprano and the soloist in Trinity choir. She had selected Gounod's "The King of Love My Shepherd Is!"

Never had such a sermon been heard from Trinity pulpit. The vast audience was swayed as by an unseen power as the preacher, in utter forgetfulness of self, plead the great love of God as the source and cause of all pure and ennobling human love.

When the sermon was finished and Evelyn arose to sing, those who knew her best were alarmed, so white and bloodless was her face. Never had she been known to sing as she sang that day. Never was there such sweetness and pathos and power in her rich voice. When she sat down, there was a large crimson spot on either cheek, while her great lustrous eyes were filled with tears.

At the close of the service, Albert stepped over to Evelyn and took her hand in his.

"If I could but have heard that song before I preached, it would have been an inspiration to my sermon!"

"The sermon was an inspiration to my song!"

And love was the inspiration of both!

Albert Armby soon became aware that at last he had met the woman he could not help loving with all his heart. At first his love was like a sweet melody to which he paused and listened, fearing lest it might die away; but soon it rose to a flood of entrancing harmony upon which he was borne in delightful helplessness.

"What do you think of your new minister by this time?"

This question was asked by a little, short-faced woman with an inquisitive nose and gossipy mouth, at a meeting of the ladies of Trinity church, held some weeks after Armby's arrival. Then she waited for an answer as one waits who has something more to say.

"Why," said one of the ladies after an awkward silence, "Mr. Armby is building up our church and congregation very rapidly, and we think ourselves quite fortunate in having secured him for its pastor."

"I hope," said the woman with the inquisitive nose, "that his work will be lasting, and that you will continue to like him."

A very pious wish, indeed; but there was something in the way in which it was expressed which meant the same as if the woman had said in plain, simple English, "just wait a little while until the newness wears off and his congregations begin to wane, and then you may not like him quite so well." And so for

a full half hour, the new minister was the sole subject of conversation among these pious women. If the conversation lagged or showed signs of changing to some other topic, the woman with the gossipy mouth would put in some remark which started it anew. It was obvious to all present that she indulged no very kindly feeling towards the man whose merits (or demerits) she so much wished to have discussed; on the contrary it was evident that she had introduced the subject in the hope that she might elicit at least some remark of dissatisfaction towards the new preacher. But she had so far been gratified by no such remark. All who had said anything about him had only approving words to utter. They had not spoken of him in terms of extravagance, but in language which showed them to be ladies of good taste and of undoubted loyalty to their pastor.

Sitting somewhat apart from the rest of the company was Evelyn Blakeslee. Her long, round, tapering fingers were busy with some needlework she had brought with her. She was so deeply absorbed in her work that she seemed to pay very little heed to the conversation to which she was compelled to listen. Yet not another in all the little company was so deeply interested in what was being said. During the whole conversation concerning the minister she had uttered not a word. Now and then, especially when the woman with an inquisitive nose would make some remark which but illy concealed her intense dislike for the minister, Evelyn would become a trifle pale and her large eyes would flash out the indignation she felt but did not express. Again when some one else gave

utterance to words of commendation, the richness of her complexion would deepen a trifle, while she applied herself still more intently to her needle. At last, the woman with the inquisitive nose, thinking, perhaps, that this silence boded no good to the young minister, said,

"We have not heard a single word from Evelyn."

Every one was silent and waited to hear the reply. They had all learned that, usually she had little to say; but that when she did speak it was well worth their while to listen. Being challenged thus openly, Evelyn had no escape from saying something, without appearing to be angry or rude. After a moment's silence she calmly said,

"I have said nothing because I have not deemed it necessary to speak. But since you desire to know what I think, I will say that I regard Mr. Armby as an earnest, sincere and sensible man who cares more for our prayerful sympathy and cooperation in his work among us, than he does for either our criticisms or our commendations."

The ladies soon thereafter dispersed, the inquisitress disappointed, the others annoyed.

Who was this woman with the inquisitive nose and the gossipy mouth? This is equivalent to the question, Who was the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff? for she was the wife of that reverend gentleman; and but for that fact would have lived and died as little and unknown as she had been before she was dragged out of her obscurity by becoming his wife. Mrs. Augustus Topliff was her husband's eyes, ears and nose, to see, hear and smell out whatever he might de-

sire to know. If she had ever had a will of her own, it had long since been absorbed in the stronger will of her husband. Whatever her lord and master required, she did, not so much because she loved him overmuch, but because she had been made to feel that she had no good reason for living except to promote his ambitions. The reverend gentleman himself had a way of doing by proxy anything that he ought to have been ashamed of, and keeping out of sight himself; hence it was next to impossible to trace anything directly to his door. His wife was his spy and informer touching all church matters with which the ladies had to do. Therefore he was particular that she should attend all the social gatherings of the ladies of Mr. Armby's church, though of that church she was not a member.

CHAPTER IX

THE BIG MINISTER

THE Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff, in the process of development into a semi-centinarian, had grown to be a portly, bustling, pompous clergyman with a smoothly-shaven, smug face, a buttermilk complexion and long coarse hair which had once been black but was now a brindled gray. He dressed in the stereotyped clerical fashion; and it was a grave question whether he thought more of his long-tailed, double-breasted, Prince Albert coat, or his elongated growth of brindled hair.

There was nothing in the man's appearance which would lead the casual observer to distrust or dislike him. On the contrary, there was something in the apparently open and cordial bearing of the reverend gentleman which inspired the unwary with confidence. He had a hand-shake or a wave of the hand for every one he met, and greeted every passer-by with a smile and a word of cheer. He was especially affable towards those in high places.

His old time excitability in the pulpit had become chronic. He made a great show of physical energy, stamping with his feet, pounding the pulpit with his clenched fists, twisting himself into grotesque attitudes while he combed his long hair with his big, pudgy fingers. His greatest effects were produced by telling

pathetic, imaginary stories, and shedding enforced tears which seldom failed to move the tender sensibilities of susceptible people. After an hour of such exertion, he would come down from the pulpit fairly exhausted and puffing for breath; while the people would go away remembering nothing except his lugubrious stories, but saying one to another, "what a wonderful sermon! what a dear good man!"

It has been said that every man has a dual life,—one side of which appears to the public, the other only to those who know him more intimately. This was particularly true of the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff. The pious and affable side of his life appeared to the unthinking public; but to the close observer and to not a few who had occasion to know him more intimately, the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff was an altogether different sort of man. While to the unsuspecting public he was a man of wonderful humility, he was in fact a man of inordinate vanity. He was vindictiveness personified. His small, cold gray eyes had a way of seeing everything without seeming to see anything. There was something sinister in this look.

It was Mr. Topliff's ambition to be considered the most noted divine, the most eloquent orator, the most popular preacher in all this intermontane region. He had a few set sermons which he preached in season and out of season,—a few choice lectures which he delivered under one name or another on almost any occasion. A few of these productions were really masterpieces and gave him great renown until one of the leading newspapers caught him napping and published one of his celebrated lectures in "deadly paral-

lels" with the same identical lecture, which the Rev. Augustus Topliff had copied from a book, read on a great public occasion, and handed, minus quotation marks, to a reporter that it might be given greater notoriety through the press.

The officials of his church, in appointing Mr. Topliff to this ultra frontier mission field, had clothed him with almost autocratic authority. While the field was yet new, he had but little opportunity to exercise this power. The lion is called the king of the forest; but what is it to be king, when there are no subjects to rule?

The Rev. Dr. Topliff, after ruling for years over a realm without a subject, made repeated trips to the east, and by his tears and entreaties persuaded men to go as missionaries to this isolated field,—not that their services were so much needed, but that the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff might have opportunity to gratify his consuming ambition. Many a young man was persuaded by an appeal to his sense of duty, to give up ever-widening opportunities for usefulness where his influence extended to hundreds if not to thousands, and go out into this barren field to labor among people who did not want him and would not hear him. All too often he found to his great disappointment and sorrow, that he had cut loose from associations of much value only to become the victim of his ecclesiastical superior and to find himself at the mercy of a man, who, though a minister of the gospel of the compassionate Christ, could blight the hopes and crush the spirit of his victim with as little remorse as ever tyrant could torture and destroy his slave. In

most cases where men were thus persuaded to go as missionaries to this territory, they had to borrow money to pay their way to their field of labor; and after having reached their destination, found that they must be supported by missionary appropriations that were made through the hands and at the discretion of this ecclesiastical autocrat. When it is considered that not only was their support subject to his discretion, but that they were at his mercy in the matter of the places where they should toil, it can readily be seen how completely his subordinates were in his power. At the same time his lordship was drawing a liberal salary from the missionary funds which poor men and poorer women were contributing out of their penury.

But a new order of things had arisen. The railway had come. Centres of population had sprung up. A new class of people had come in. The churches in these centres had become strong, and insisted upon exercising some discretion in the selection of their pastors. Trinity church had grown strong both in numbers and wealth and had utterly shaken off the grasp of this ecclesiastical tyrant. He wore the vestments of authority, but the sceptre had fallen from his hand.

Albert Armby, since coming to X——, had impressed himself strongly upon the people of the city without respect to denomination and was recognized as a strong, capable, industrious and successful man. By all this the vanity of the Rev. Augustus Topliff was deeply wounded. There were several reasons why he should feel very keenly envious of the new preacher.

Mr. Armby was a tall muscular man with broad shoulders and chest, slender waist, erect form and commanding presence. His brow was low but broad and appeared all the whiter because of its contrast with the crown of dark auburn hair which, with a slight tendency to be curly, adorned his well-formed head. His nose was Grecian and well proportioned to his face, dividing the ample breadth between his large expressive eyes. His upper lip was covered by a handsome mustache leaving entirely exposed a mouth that evinced at once tenderness and resolution; while his well-set jaws and ample but well-formed chin told of immovable firmness and force of character.

Mr. Armby generally began his sermons in a quiet voice which, while not seeming louder than ordinary conversation, could be distinctly heard in every part of his large audience-room. His first sentences, though so quietly spoken, were tremulous with intense thought and feeling and had the effect of holding the attention of the listener from the very first word spoken. For perhaps ten minutes he would proceed in this quiet manner with scarcely a movement or gesture. His audience felt, meantime, that there stood before them a man the complete master of himself, of his theme and of his congregation; and that but for this mastery of self, the great thoughts and the intense feelings of the preacher, struggling to find expression, would rush in torrents from his lips. Gradually the speaker would become more animated and his face would glow with celestial light. Then every attitude and movement, every gesture, every glance of his lustrous eyes, every expression of his face added force

to the grand truths to which he gave utterance. Then would pour forth such a torrent of persuasive appeal, entreaty, pathos and love, that even the most hardened felt strangely drawn to a better life. Every sermon was a finished temple. Broadly and deeply the foundation was laid. Round after round the superstructure rose until it stood out finished, complete in every part—a temple of truth wherein dwelt righteousness.

The Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff was envious of the fine form and commanding presence of the newcomer. His own inferiority as an orator and a preacher was not more apparent to any one than to himself. No one knew better than he how shallow and hypocritical were his pompous and vociferous performances. Nevertheless, he beheld the popularity and power of this newcomer with ill-concealed envy and chagrin. Had not he, the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff, been for years the most eloquent divine, the most popular preacher in all the regions round about? By what right did this young man come into his realm, capture the hearts of the people and strip him, the great Dr. Topliff, of his laurels and popularity?

Furthermore, Mr. Armby, with many regrets to be sure, found it impossible to agree in every particular with the opinions of his ecclesiastical superior. "The Rev. Augustus Topliff," to use the expression of one of his brother preachers, "was more orthodox than the devil." In his opinion, there was a real, literal hell, burning with sure enough fire and brimstone; and to his great horror, if not satisfaction, the great majority of people were headed in that direction.

Mr. Armby's position on such subjects was pretty clearly expressed in a sermon which he preached to his people one Sunday morning and from which the following is an extract:

"I confess to great perplexity over the dark problem of human destiny. What is to be the final fate of the great mass of people, in Christian lands and lands that are not Christian, who apparently live and die without God and without the Christian's hope? Is there no escape from the conclusion that they are consigned to eternal despair? If there is any hope for those who die impenitent, the Great Teacher when on this earth, was as silent as the tomb concerning such hope. It is not for me to speak where He was silent; it is not for my puny hand to unfurl the white banner of hope where He seems to have hung out the sombre flag of despair. And yet I lift my face towards the Judge of all the earth who will do right, in the humble faith that any condition of being which must continue forever will be better than not to live at all; and my heart dares to hope that God, whose name is love, will, in His own good time and in His own good way, put an end to all sin and suffering and that the time will come in the providence of the divine Father, when there shall not be a cry of pain or a wail of despair in all the fair universe of God!"

The Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff was a most devout believer in the literal inspiration of the Bible. In his opinion the writers of the Bible, and he knew to his own absolute satisfaction who these writers were, had no volition of their own, but were the first and original writing machines, performed upon by the Holy

Ghost. He firmly believed, or claimed to believe that the Mosaic account of the creation, the story of the fall of man including the conversation between Eve and the serpent, the flood and all else related in the Old Testament, were literally correct and true. He would not have been more thoroughly convinced of it, if he had been there and had seen it all for himself. He had no more doubt about the speech of Baalam's ass than if he had made it with his own mouth. He no more questioned the story of Jonah and the whale than if he himself had been the whale and had suffered a severe attack of stomach-ache because of having swallowed, unmasticated, something so indigestible as a hard-headed old Jew.

Mr. Armby also believed in the inspiration of the Bible; his belief did not, however, extend to the extreme orthodoxy advocated by the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff. In a paper which he read before the Minister's Association of X——, he said:

"In assuming to defend as literal occurrences, some of the matters related in the Old Testament, we burden ourselves with a needless and difficult task. Nothing can be lost by a frank admission of the truth. It is neither unreasonable nor heretic to take the ground that some of the stories of the Bible, which appear so ridiculous when taken as veritable transactions, may have been in the nature of allegories and folklore and yet divinely intended to convey important truth, especially to the people who lived in the times for which much of the Old Testament was written. These, as well as the law may have been designed to serve the purpose of a schoolmaster to bring the world to the

Christ who should teach, not with legend or allegory, but with authority.

"When we undertake to defend the theory that the serpent held converse in human language with the woman Eve; when we advocate the idea that the ass remonstrated with the prophet in vernacular Hebrew; when we attempt to convince thinking people that Jonah dwelt three days and three nights in the entrails of a whale or that the vast machinery of the solar system was actually brought to a standstill to give the armies of Israel a few more hours of daylight in which to slaughter their enemies, we are not only undertaking a gratuitous task, but are running the risk of making ourselves and the grand system of truth contained in the scriptures ridiculous in the eyes of thoughtful people, even if we do not lay ourselves liable to the charge of insincerity. When on the other hand we treat these narratives as allegories and point out how strikingly they teach the subtlety of temptation, the difficulties which beset our path when we start out upon a mission of error or undertake to escape the legitimate duties and obligations imposed upon us by the divine Father, and how He overrules in the affairs of individuals and armies and nations who do battle in His name, then these Old Testament stories, so absurd when taken literally, become beautiful in their settings and luminous with the light of truth; then they no longer weaken, but rather add strength to the grand poetry and prophecy of the Old Testament and the matchless teachings of the New.

"I have no quarrel with any man because of his doubts. Faith necessarily admits the possibility of

doubt. The minister, however, who preaches his doubts, makes a fatal mistake. The minister of the gospel should not preach his doubts but his convictions. When he no longer has convictions to preach, he should retire from the pulpit.

"We are here. Life is real. It is also problematical. Christianity is the best solution of the dark problem of life and destiny man has ever found and Christ is the only true exponent of Christianity. Therefore it is reasonable to accept this solution and its exponent, notwithstanding any doubts we may have."

In the eyes of the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff all this was rank heresy; and he did not hesitate to say that any man entertaining these views had no business in the pulpit of an orthodox church.

Furthermore, this reverend autocrat was a strict disciplinarian and an ardent advocate of the use of the rod in the home. When on the topic of family government, the old saying, "spare the rod and spoil the child," was ever in his mouth. In his way of thinking, the church was a sort of family institution in which the young people were as children who needed the strictest surveillance and upon occasion, the application of the ecclesiastical lash quite as much as the unruly members of the household stood in need of the rod. He fulminated, in season and out of season against what he termed "popular amusements"; and, in his opinion, the church member, old or young, who was seen at the play-house, though ever so seldom, or even occasionally indulged in certain forbidden games or tripped the light fantastic toe, was headed straightway to perdition and must be "labored with"; and,

unless there were abundant evidences of genuine contrition, should be speedily cut off as a branch that is withered.

Albert Armby was very gentle and lenient towards the young people in the church and tender towards all children. The following is an extract from an address, touching these matters, which he delivered before his congregation:

"Never having had any experience in the management of children, I am loath to offer any advice on the subject. My varied experience, however, in being managed when a child warrants me in making some suggestions of a general character.

"I have a profound conviction that the policy of repression which has so long been pursued towards children and young people in the church and in the home is fraught with more serious results than we have ever imagined. It should not be the aim of parents or of church authorities to repress the energies of the young people, but to give them wise direction. There is no more serious business before us than that of rightly directing the tremendous energies of youth.

"A child subjected to the process of repression, will either degenerate into a mere dummy on which some masculine or feminine scold winds the bandages of his own experiences, as the cerements were wont to be wound about an Egyptian mummy, or will break away from its thralldom like a colt from its harness, and go tearing at breakneck speed to the bad.

"While I am thoroughly opposed to any institution or method of amusement which is clearly of a demoralizing tendency or even questionable in its moral in-

fluence, I am not in sympathy with the specific prohibitions of the church except where such prohibitions are expressly made in the scriptures. When we legislate where the scriptures are silent, do we not profess to be wise beyond what is written either in the Law or in the Prophets? Either the church goes too far in its interdictions or it does not go far enough. It lays its ban upon the theatre, the dance and the horse-race; but does not prohibit its members from attending at the cock-pit, witnessing a prize-fight or being present at a bull-baiting. Let us do as the writers of the New Testament did—teach the spirit of all righteousness and lay it upon the hearts and consciences of the young people to decide for themselves much that is merely discretionary—we being careful to place before them such examples as they may safely follow.

"Let me be clearly understood: so long as these prohibitions are upon the statutes of our churches, let us respect them and be obedient thereto, not for wrath but for conscience' sake—meanwhile using our influence to have them repealed. If the church does not want its young people to become worldly, it must have something to offer them better than the world has to give. If your child is found playing with the scissors, you may scold the child and wrench the scissors from its hand; but it will probably cry and want them more than ever. But if you offer an orange for the scissors, the child will drop them of its own accord."

This, the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff pronounced disloyalty to the church. It was in vain that Armby claimed it was because of his love for the church and

its institutions that he plead for the repeal of these laws, believing them to be hindrances to the usefulness of the church rather than a help. Nevertheless, in the esteem of Dr. Topliff, it was disloyalty to the church to hold these opinions, and he did not find it in his capacious heart to excuse the slightest taint either of heterodoxy or disloyalty. Thus on the subjects of personal appearance, effectiveness of discourse, orthodoxy and loyalty to church government, Mr. Armby had the great misfortune to excite the intense jealousy and incur the cordial ill-will of his ecclesiastical superior.

The Rev. Augustus Topliff therefore secretly resolved to rid himself, as soon as possible, of this independent young upstart. It did not occur to him that this might not be an easy thing to do. Hitherto he had driven from Trinity church and from the city every man who, because of his ability and success had promised to become, in any sense, his rival. He had been able to do this heretofore because the church, not being strong, needed to be helped by appropriations from the missionary funds which were under his own control. More than once he had carried his point when opposed by the officers of the church, by threatening, indirectly to be sure, to discontinue the missionary appropriation.

It is often the case that men who have seen their best days imagine themselves to be as strong as ever. For more than twenty years the Rev. Augustus Topliff had been the recognized leader of the people of his denomination in this far-off western field. He had regarded himself as the ablest preacher and the chief representative of that particular faith. It was very natural, there-

fore, that he should most ardently desire to continue in this esteem. Notwithstanding Mr. Armby's acknowledged ability and success, the Rev. Mr. Topliff was deceived by his inordinate sense of self-importance into the belief that the whole church and city would go into ecstasies over the bare possibility that so distinguished a divine as he might be induced to accept the pastorate of Trinity.

CHAPTER X

EDNA LEE

"WILL you kindly show me a seat near the door?"

This question was asked of one of the ushers of Trinity church one bright Sunday morning. The questioner was evidently a stranger in the city. She had an unusually bright and intelligent face, a small but perfectly formed body, elastic step, and withal that self-possession and grace of movement which come only from habitual association with people of intelligence and of refined manners. She was dressed in a close-fitting suit of black broadcloth, having no adornment whatever, except that she wore about her neck and wrists some delicately wrought point lace. That she might not attract attention, and because she wished to retire unobserved at the close of the services, she asked to be seated near the door. It was, however, one of the unwritten laws of Armby's church that no stranger should be permitted to leave without a cordial welcome. Hardly had the services closed, when the young stranger found herself greeted so pleasantly and with such evident sincerity, that her natural aversion to meeting strangers was largely overcome.

"I am Mrs. Ashby, and may I have the pleasure of knowing your name?" said a lady near her.

"My name is Edna Lee."

"That is a pleasant name, and it gives me pleasure to know you," said the lady. "You are traveling through, I suppose, and stopped off over Sunday? I am glad that you came in to worship with us."

"No," said the young woman, "I hope I have come to stay."

"Then allow me to welcome you again and to introduce you to some of our people."

Before the stranger had time either to object or consent, she was being presented by Mrs. Ashby to her friends and acquaintances. By this time Mr. Armby had approached.

"Miss Lee," said one of the ladies, "this is Mr. Armby, our pastor. Miss Lee has recently come to our city and expects to remain among us."

"We give you a cordial welcome, Miss Lee," said Armby, "both to our city and our church." He then passed on to greet others who without knowing it, were being detained until they could be presented to the minister.

Edna Lee was bright, vivacious and entertaining among people with whom she was well acquainted, but had a natural disinclination to meet strangers. But when she did meet them it was with a self-command, a radiance of countenance and readiness of intelligent response that was at once both simple and charming. As the people went to their homes that day they might have been heard to say one to another,

"What a pleasant little woman that Miss Lee seems."

"She is as bright and sparkling as a mountain stream."

"Her face fairly shone when in conversation."

"My! but wasn't she elegantly dressed?"

Edna Lee, on her part, went to her room with a far different impression from that she usually bore with her from church. In most churches she had attended, there was a freezing stiffness and formality; the preacher delivered his sermon as if his main object was to entertain his listeners and send them away with a favorable impression of himself and his performance; the people, after the services, filed out of the church like so many moving icicles dressed up in their Sunday clothes, or if they so far relaxed their frigidity as to greet a stranger or even an acquaintance, it was with such a cold formality as one icicle might be expected to exhibit in an effort to bow to another. It was altogether different at Armby's church. The genuine cordiality of the preacher himself seemed contagious. It spread through his congregation until it was as natural for his people to be cordial to others as for the fire to give out its warmth or the sun its rays. The earnestness, the sincerity, the evident conviction with which the sermon was preached, its intense thought, its liberality and its strong appeal to the best and noblest in human nature, made a profound impression upon Edna. Furthermore, it must be confessed, she was attracted in no small degree by the man himself.

"He is the only man I have ever seen," thought she, "who seems to measure up to my ideal of a true and noble character. He might not if I knew more of him."

While there was in her nature a deep, strong vein

of religious feeling, it was largely counteracted by a highly skeptical cast of mind. The sun shone above her, but the light and warmth of its rays did not fall upon her heart because of the shadow of her head. Whether this skepticism arose from a natural intellectual bent or whether it was the product of prejudices she had formed, it would be difficult to say. Perhaps there was a mingling of both.

An exigency had arisen in the life of this young woman which made it necessary for her to rely wholly upon herself. Happy is the young woman who has acquired a trade or developed a talent by which she can meet such an emergency without depending upon others. From her childhood she had shown a skill with the needle and a genius in designing garments which bordered upon the marvelous. In her girlhood she was not fortunate enough to own a doll, except as she improvised one out of anything to which she could fit a dress; yet, as she had opportunity, which was not often, she would play the dressmaker and delight her playmates with the exquisite garments she would design and make for their dolls. As she grew to womanhood she employed this gift in making all her own clothes and sometimes making dresses for others of her immediate friends.

Conscious of her own talents and ability, she had come to X—— for the purpose of starting a high-class dressmaking establishment. Though she had to begin in a small way, it was not long until she had more work than she could possibly do. To meet the demands of her customers, she hired a house on one of the principal streets of the city and continued to add

to her help until her establishment became one of the largest and most popular of its kind in the city. She seemed to be possessed of a magic by which she could take the stoutest and thickest woman into her parlors and send her out remodeled into a figure of no ill proportions. Likewise she could take a few inches from the height of the unduly tall and thin woman and send her forth much better satisfied with the amended edition of herself.

Such rooms in her house as she did not need for her work, she fitted up for the use of her help. These rooms she rented to such of her sewing girls as did not have homes of their own, and employed a housekeeper to prepare their meals and look after their needs—all this at actual cost and greatly to the comfort and economy of her girls. She required them to work from eight in the morning until noon, and from one to five in the evening. Under no circumstances would she require them to work a moment after the hour for quitting. To the girls she called her place "our home." Her requirements were few and simple but were rigidly though kindly enforced.

After she became acquainted with Mr. Armby, she counseled with him freely regarding all that had to do with the care of her giris. Because of his interest in the benevolent feature of her home, and because several of the girls were members of his church and congregation, he was a frequent visitor to Miss Lee's establishment, usually calling of an evening when she and her girls were at leisure. On such occasions, they very often discussed the work in which they were respectively engaged.

"I have never asked you, Miss Lee, what your church relations have been."

"Pretty much what they are now, Mr. Armby."

"Why do you not identify yourself with the church? It is very evident that there is a strong desire on your part to do good. The church is simply an organization for the purpose of doing good; and by union with the church I believe one may multiply his usefulness many fold. A soldier can fight to better advantage in the ranks."

"You would not have me in your church, Mr. Armby."

"Why do you think so?"

"For the reason that either I would have to profess what I do not believe or you ignore the requirements of your church in the reception of members. I am sure you would not do the one nor have me do the other."

"And why would such a thing be necessary?"

"Because I would have to assent to your declarations of faith or you would have to receive me without such assent."

"Perhaps you have a misunderstanding of what the church requires in the matter of faith. If you will tell me what doctrines you cannot subscribe to, I may be able to explain them to your satisfaction."

"No, Mr. Armby. I value your good opinion too highly to impair it by telling you how thorough a skeptic I am."

"I assure you, Miss Lee, that I esteem more highly perhaps than you think, any favorable opinion you may have of me. So far from impairing that opinion

by a frank statement of your beliefs or doubts, I should respect you all the more for it."

"Well, then, to let the whole matter out in a word, I think I am an incorrigible little infidel. Take your so-called Apostle's Creed which all the orthodox churches accept and to which their members must subscribe. There is not a statement in it which I do not doubt, while some of them I utterly disbelieve."

Albert sat for a moment looking into Edna's face which, though flushed under his scrutiny, wore an expression so open and earnest that it would have been impossible to doubt her sincerity.

"There, now," said she, "I see I have disappointed you and damaged myself in your estimation."

"To be perfectly frank with you, Miss Lee, I must confess to some disappointment; but you have by no means suffered in my esteem. I have now a diagnosis of the case and may be able to help the patient. If you cannot conscientiously unite with any of what you call the orthodox churches you might be able to satisfy yourself in some of the so-called liberal churches. As any government is better than no government, any church may be better than none."

"I cannot quite agree with you there, Mr. Armby. The churches called liberal are, in my opinion, among the worst foes to Christian faith. They claim to be Christians and yet are constantly preaching their doubts. We expect the Bible to be assailed by out and out infidels; it ought to find only defenders in the pulpit."

"Well, there is much truth in what you say. I have sometimes been tempted to discuss some of my

own doubts in the pulpit; but I think, after what you have said, I will not do so until I have run out of convictions."

"I did not suppose you had any doubts, Mr. Armby."

There was a tone of disappointment in her words. Armby saw it, and in the fact made the discovery that it is unwise for the Christian minister even to let his people know that he has any doubts.

"I see," he said earnestly, "that you are disappointed. Let me assure you that on the great essential truths of Christianity my faith is unhesitating and unwavering. It is only upon some non-essentials that I have any doubts whatever; and I am sorry that I gave any intimation of them."

"Mr. Armby, I do not want you to doubt at all. I hope you will take what I say in the spirit I mean it when I tell you that you are the only minister I have ever listened to whom I believed thoroughly sincere and earnest in all he said and did. Since I began attending upon your ministry, I have found myself wishing that I too might believe, and have hoped that in time I might come to think differently from what I have thought from my early childhood. To discover that you, who have set me to thinking, yourself doubt in any important matter, would be fatal to any latent aspirations I may have."

After some further conversation, Albert took his leave and went to his room deeply pondering over what had been said. He had awakened to a new sense of his responsibilities, not only towards Edna Lee, but towards hundreds of others, perhaps, who

looked to him and depended upon him even as she seemed to do.

Edna first met the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff at a social gathering in the parlors of Trinity Church. When he was introduced to her, he grasped her small hand in his great fist with a grip that sent a pain to her very shoulder, while he bent upon her a gaze that caused her to shrink from him with undisguised repugnance. The blood mounted to her temples in crimson blushes, as she turned abruptly away. She avoided him the rest of the evening, though he often put himself in her way and sought to attract her attention. While she did not permit herself to notice him, she felt that his eyes were upon her. At last she left the church and returned to her home in order to escape his presence.

A few days after Edna's first meeting with Dr. Topliff, one of the girls, whose duty it was to attend the door, reported to Edna that a gentleman was waiting to see her in the parlor.

"Who is he?" asked Edna.

"He said I should not tell," replied the girl with a mischievous laugh.

"O, you rogue!" said Edna as she playfully pinched the girl's ear and left the room.

Imagine her surprise and disgust to find that her caller was the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff. He did not remain long, and when he emerged it was with a hang-dog countenance. After walking down the street a few rods, he stopped, turned about and gave the house a look of malignant hatred.

CHAPTER XI

LOVE'S SORROW

ARMBY often met Evelyn Blakeslee at the church, in social gatherings, and not infrequently at her home; but she continued to treat him with such marked reserve that he dared not indulge the hope that his love might be returned.

There is no one more wretched than he who is tormented by a hopeless love. Goaded by this torture, Armby plunged headlong into his work without stopping to consider the effect upon his health and strength. There was more work about him than ten men could have done; yet he sought to do it all himself. The poor, the sick, the distressed were sought out as never before. Far into the weary night would he watch by the bedside of the dying.

"I find relief in this," thought he, "more than in anything else."

But when in the privacy of his study or in the solitude of his chamber, his heart's hunger would become so intense as to drive him almost to distraction. He ate from a sense of duty and often spent the night with scarce an hour's sleep.

Such a strain was more than even his strong frame could long endure. The tint of healthy color faded from his face while his great blue eyes seemed twice their usual size. All this became painfully obvious to his people.

"Mr. Armby is working himself to death," was often heard among his friends.

The treasurer of his church board came into his study one day.

"Armby," said he, "I have come to see you on a little matter of business. We have decided to dispense with your services."

Armby looked quickly into the man's face and read in its kindly smile a meaning not conveyed by his words.

"I think you can dispense with them without any very great loss," said Albert, with an unsuccessful attempt at pleasantry.

A close look at Armby drove all semblance of a smile from the visitor's face.

"Really, Armby, you are seriously overtaxing your strength and must take a rest. Go to the coast, or into the mountains or on a hunting trip to the forest—anywhere to get away from X——; and don't think of showing yourself here inside of a month."

"That's easier said than done. I had to walk home last night after twelve o'clock because I didn't have the change in my pocket to pay fare."

"It's your own fault, Armby. If we should pay your salary all in advance, you would give it away in a month."

"How can I visit a widow's home and look into the pinched and bloodless faces of her children and not order the grocer to send them something to eat? How can I go to the bedside of the sick and know that they have not suitable food and medicine and do nothing to supply their need? How could I——"

"Hold on there, Armby—all that is your own affair. But there is no sense in your trying to do a dozen men's work and breaking yourself down as you are sure to do if you go on at the present rate. We had a meeting last night and voted unanimously to give you a month's vacation and more if you shall need it. I was instructed to give you a check to pay your expenses and not to charge it against your salary."

Armby was out of his chair and had his friend's hand in his own warm grasp, while he struggled hard to keep back the tears.

"God bless your generous hearts!" he exclaimed. "You are far better to me than I deserve."

"When would you like to go, Mr. Armby?"

"You will have to give me a little time to plan. I cannot leave just now, but——"

"All right, Armby. The money is ready when you are."

"I thank you most earnestly!" said Armby.

A week—nearly a month passed, but the treasurer did not receive the expected notice, though he jogged Armby's memory about it from time to time.

Meanwhile the marks of wear became daily more evident upon Armby's care-worn face. As his body wasted away, his mind seemed to grow stronger and clearer, his sympathies warmer and his whole mental and spiritual nature more intense. His people would listen to his sermons entranced, and then go away filled with gloomy forebodings.

"He has gone into a rapid decline!" said one.

"A flame like that must soon burn itself out!" said another.

Meantime a year had passed since Albert and Evelyn first met, and during all this time he had borne his torture in silence. A hundred times or more he had resolved to declare his love to her, but had always been deterred by that same unbending reserve. At last he said,

"I can endure this no longer! It is better to be dead than to live this way. I will tell her. She is too generous to disdain my avowal. It may give me some relief to have her know it. I will then have her pity, at least."

The same afternoon a servant appeared at Evelyn's door, and informed her that Mr. Armby was in the parlor and wished to see her.

A flush came to Evelyn's face while her heart fluttered about like a bird in its cage.

"Tell him," said she, "that I will be down in a moment."

The servant went to deliver the message, while Evelyn arose, put her hand over her heart, walked once or twice across the floor, paused an instant before her glass and then descended the stairs leaving all traces of agitation behind. She entered the parlor and extended to Armby her hand with the same old heartbreaking reserve.

Armby arose and took her hand in his. His face was pale, his head bowed, while his frame was in a tremor from head to foot. He lifted his eyes to hers.

"Miss Blakeslee—let me say Evelyn, you must know —you must have known since first we met in this room that I love you with all my heart!"

For an instant Evelyn's face was lily white, and then

two crimson spots bloomed upon her cheeks, while the tears hung upon her drooping lashes. Her bosom heaved in violent agitation as she sought to make reply.

"Mr. Armby—I wish—O, I don't know what to say!"

He led her to a couch and seated himself by her side.

"Evelyn, I have suffered in silence until I can endure it no longer. I have not dared to hope that you return my love; but I tell you, knowing that if you cannot love me you will pity me at least. Dear Evelyn, is there any hope?"

She gently withdrew her hand.

"I have known it all the time," she said; "but hoped it might not come to this. I do not despise you, Albert. I am unworthy such a love as yours. More I cannot say—except that if you suffer, I suffer with you."

"But can you not——"

"I beg of you, Mr. Armby, not to press me further. I would not give you pain, nor would I give you greater hope than I indulge myself."

She arose and gave her hand in token that the interview was at an end.

"Come to see me, Mr. Armby, as often as you like, but do not mention again the subject of to-day. If the time ever comes when it should be a matter of further conversation between us, I will gladly mention it myself."

He took the proffered hand, pressed it to his lips and went away.

When Colonel Blakeslee came home that evening,

and kissed his daughter as was his wont, he observed that her cheeks were rosier than usual and that her eyes were red and swollen.

"What's the matter, little one?" he asked.

"O, I have had a little crying spell this afternoon."

"Your eyes tell me that without your tongue; but what have you been crying about?"

"I will tell you, father, after dinner."

During the dinner hour Colonel Blakeslee noticed that Evelyn ate sparingly, and that now and then her face became crimson while she was struggling to keep back the tears.

They had not more than reached the parlor when Colonel Blakeslee said,

"Now, little one, what is the matter?"

Evelyn came and sat upon his knees, put her arms about his neck, buried her face on his shoulder and began to sob.

"Why, Evelyn! What can have happened? I never saw you in this mood before!"

She tightened her arms about his neck and nestled up still closer to him as she managed to say between her sobs,

"Mr. Armby—told me that——"

"That you are a wicked little——"

"N-o, he told me that he loves me!"

Colonel Blakeslee was silent; but he drew his beloved daughter closer to his heart than he had for many a day, and smoothed her hair with his hand as he had done, O how many times! when she was a little child. Was it because he feared lest another should take her away from him? Or was it because

of the sympathy of his great loving heart? Both, no doubt.

When at length he spoke it was with such tenderness in his voice as Evelyn did not remember ever to have heard.

"And what did you tell him, my darling?"

"I put him off without telling him anything."

"Tell me, little one, do you love Mr. Armby?"

"I have loved him, father, since the moment we first met!"

Another long pause.

"If you love him why not tell him so?"

"If he were not a minister, I would; but I will never be a preacher's wife. I am not fit to be. I have always felt that way. And besides, things would be expected of me that I could never do, demands would be made upon me to which I could never submit."

"You should have been frank with him, Evelyn, and told him this."

"That was impossible. He is a king and the pulpit is his throne. He might be tempted to leave it for me, and then I should despise him. I would rather die than to put a temptation in his way."

Armby's interview with Evelyn had given him a ray of hope.

"I believe she loves me," thought he. "But if so, why had she wished that I would never tell her of my love? She called me by my first name and told me that she suffered with me! Yet she forbade me to speak of it again. No! Her generous heart did not want to give me pain. I wonder what was in her

mind when she said that if the time ever comes when we should speak of it again she will gladly mention it herself! I think she loves me and that there is something in her way—a prior engagement, perhaps."

CHAPTER XII

BLACKWING

EDNA LEE had been quick to notice the decline in the young minister's health. Like many others, she attributed it to overwork.

"Mr. Armby," said she on the occasion of one of his evening calls, "you are working yourself to death. This strain will break you down entirely if you do not let up."

"How can I do less while there is so much to be done?"

"I have one criticism of you, Mr. Armby, if I may be so bold as to say it."

"Speak out, Miss Lee. You will find that I am good at taking advice whether I profit by it or not."

"Well, you are like a general who tries to do all the fighting himself. Why don't you take it easier and send some of the rest of us to the front?"

"Would you go?"

"Yes, if you would let me fight in my own way. You said once that a soldier can fight better in the ranks. Yet I have read of scouts and sharp-shooters who did pretty good service on their own hook."

"Which would you be, a scout or a sharp-shooter?"

"A spy, perhaps. Seriously: when the sick are to be cared for and the destitute relieved, why do you not have others do it instead of trying to do everything yourself?"

"What would I be doing?"

"Directing others and saving your strength for the pulpit and other work which the rest of us cannot do. In my poor opinion, you would accomplish more without the danger of breaking down."

Armby was surprised at such advice coming from Edna Lee, whom everybody regarded as wholly indifferent to such matters. The fact was, however, that the unfortunate among the poor had no better friend in the city. Her interest in poor girls amounted almost to a mania. So quietly was her work done that even the recipients of her benevolence were often ignorant of its source.

The public held an altogether different opinion of this independent little woman. She, perhaps, was at fault that she was not better understood; but it suited her humor to do as she did.

One evening just after dark, Edna called at the home of a poor family, one of the children of which was seriously ill. Soon after she entered there was a rap at the door. A tremor of loathing crept over Edna as the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff was admitted to the room.

"You here?" said he as he arched his eyebrows and glared at her from his cold gray eyes. "I did not expect to find you visiting the sick," he added.

Edna made no reply; but after speaking a few words of encouragement to the sick child, she left a bouquet of flowers and was about to depart.

"Wait a moment," said Topliff, "and I will see you home. It is growing dark."

"I prefer to go alone," she replied.

Nevertheless, when she left the room, Topliff followed. They walked in silence until a short distance from the house. Then Edna stopped.

"Doctor Topliff, I demand to know the reason of your persistence in following me!"

"Let us not discuss the matter here," he replied, with an uneasy glance up and down the street. "I will go home with you, or anywhere else you say and then we can talk it over."

"You will not go home with me and I will not accompany you elsewhere."

"I would like to know what is to hinder me from going where I please," replied Topliff in an insolent tone as he glided up closer to her.

"Have a care!" said she, stepping back as he approached. "You doubtless think I have no one to protect me. I warn you that I am amply prepared to protect myself. If you follow me further, you do it at your peril!"

As she said this the rays of a distant street lamp fell upon her eyes. Topliff recoiled before this little woman as she flashed upon him one wrathful look and then disappeared down the street.

Edna was utterly indifferent to many of the ordinary conventionalities of society. Not that she meant to be defiant of public opinion. It simply did not occur to her that her actions might be a subject of criticism. She paid little attention to the conduct of other people. So far as she was concerned they might do as they pleased while she took the liberty of doing the same. If she desired to go to the theatre alone, she went, and returned to her home alone, it mattered

not at what time of night. She was not afraid of anything.

She was especially fond of horses and had brought with her to X—— one of the finest specimens of that noble animal ever seen in the city. He soon came to be known by the horse connoisseurs as "Blackwing." Either in the harness or under the saddle, he was the fleetest of the fleet. There were some fine drives and roadways about the city. On any suitable evening, and often until late, she might be seen on the back of her horse for a long ride in the suburbs and sometimes far into the country. Her pet name for her horse was "My Lover"; and he was the only lover she seemed to have or desire. Their affection was mutual. He was always delighted when she appeared at the boarding stable at which he was kept, and relished the evening jaunts even more than his mistress. He seemed fully to understand her moods and to keep himself in harmony with them. He would be walking quietly along the road when, at a word from her scarcely audible, or at a certain wave of her hand he would spring into a run swifter than the speed of a frightened deer. Even then the touch of his feet seemed so light that they could scarcely be heard a dozen rods away. It was no uncommon occurrence for one to be traveling along the road and hear behind him the stroke of a horse's feet. Before he could have time to look around, a black horse would go sweeping by with the speed of the wind, and the traveler would barely have time to observe that the rider of this flying steed was a little woman in a black riding habit, whose face was all aglow with exhilaration and delight.

On Sunday afternoons she was given to taking long rides into the mountains, when it was her delight to traverse the most unfrequented paths. Wherever her horse could find a place for his feet she would go. She was often seen from the valley, sitting upon the back of her horse on mountain heights where the foot of man seldom found its way. The result of all this was, that she became exceedingly popular among the owners and lovers of fine horses and subjected herself to the severe criticisms of the finicky and fastidious. She was equally ignorant of her popularity and of her adverse criticisms, both of which reached a culmination on the occasion of the State fair held at X——.

It was suggested by an admirer of her horse that she enter him for the trotting races on the grand day of the fair.

"No one but myself has ever driven him," said she.

"But a good driver can be had."

"That may be; but I would not trust anybody to handle him."

"I know a man who is the best horseman in the state. If we can get him, he will manage your horse perfectly."

"I should have to be sure of that, even if I had decided to let the horse go."

"Your horse has many admirers, Miss Lee, and they would take it as a great favor if you will allow him to be entered."

"I would be glad to please the friends of my horse, but I will have to think it over."

"There is one thing, Miss Lee—you would have to stay off his back until after the fair."

"Till after the fair! When is it to be?"

"O, it is nearly two months yet. He would have to be put in training right away. You could drive him all you please—the more the better."

"That wouldn't make so much difference; I drive him a great deal anyhow."

"You had better say yes, Miss Lee, and then I can engage the driver if he is not already spoken."

"No. You may bring him to me that I may talk with him—meantime I will think about it. There is one thing I will tell you now—the man does not live who shall touch my horse with a whip. I would not even allow one to be carried."

"That can be as you wish, Miss Lee."

Edna finally consented to allow the horse to be entered. He was first accustomed to the track by being driven by Edna, then by the driver with Edna in the light buggy and finally by the driver alone in a racing sulky. The driver was really a capable horseman and managed Blackwing with skill and ease notwithstanding the displeasure manifested by the horse at having his reins in the hands of any other than his own mistress.

The day came. It had been announced that the black horse would be in the race and great expectations were raised. A large crowd filled the grandstand to overflowing, while lines of spectators stood along the fence inclosing the track. Edna was in the grandstand, a deeply interested and confident spectator. As the horses came out she watched for her lover, and when he appeared, there was a murmur of admiration from the throng and some applause from his special admirers.

There was the usual delay, and manœuvring for advantage. At first the black horse was quiet and tractable; but he grew nervous and impatient as time and again he came down to the line only to be wheeled about and returned to the starting-point again. At length he began to show signs of rebellion.

Suddenly the radiance of Edna's face gave way to an expression of anger and indignation. She saw a groom hand the driver a whip. Edna quickly left her seat and made her way towards the track intending to demand that the driver give up his whip. But just as she reached the fence the word was given to go. The driver almost unconsciously touched the black horse with the whip. He would as well have goaded him with a red hot iron. Not for five long years had there been laid upon the black beauty a stroke of any kind other than of affection from the light hand of his little mistress. Quicker than thought the horse reared high in the air and then leaped forward with such force as to unseat the driver and land him ten feet away in the dust of the track. Blackwing, mad with fury, continued to rear and plunge, striking with his fore feet at every one who tried to approach him.

Edna had seen it all. She pushed her way through the crowd, climbed—almost leaped over the fence and ran to the horse, commanding all others to stand aside. At the sound of her voice the horse ran to her and thrust his nose into her hands for her caresses. She gave him but a touch and an assuring word and then, grasping the lines, she leaped into the sulky and spoke to him so low that scarcely any ears save his own heard what she said. In an instant he had gathered

himself together, and was fairly flying over the track.

All this had required but a few moments; but in that time the other horses were several hundred feet in the lead. No one, unless it were Edna herself, supposed that the black horse could regain the lost ground, though every one applauded the courage of the little woman and the splendid work of her horse. By the time the first round was made Blackwing had gained half the distance between himself and the other racers. When the second round was finished he was full abreast of the foremost horse. Every one felt assured that the race was as good as won. But just as he was passing the leading horse, the driver as if by accident, though on purpose, touched the black horse with his whip. The dastardly act was seen and understood by the spectators, who cried "shame! shame!" Instantly the black horse was on his hind feet again and lunged as before; but Edna caught hold of the seat of the sulky so as not to become unseated, and at the same time called to the horse. He instantly quieted again at her word, stretched himself over the track for the last desperate struggle to win the race. Slowly but surely he gained upon his antagonist. Edna had guided her horse so as to be out of reach of the driver's whip. Blackwing was a length at least behind the leading horse, while only two hundred yards of the race remained. Edna was seen to lean forward as if saying something to her horse. He understood. Every muscle of the splendid animal worked with the accuracy of highly wrought machinery. He lowered himself at least six inches and stretched himself still

closer to the ground. His small feet seemed scarcely to touch the track as he shot clean ahead of his antagonist and crossed the line a full length in the lead, while the vast crowd arose to its feet, and amid waving hats and handkerchiefs, sent up deafening cheers for the black horse and his brave little driver.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DEVIL A MONK WAS HE

"I TELL you what, Sharply, I will not submit to being supplanted by that conceited young upstart! I have wandered up and down the valleys and through the mountains of that western country for more than twenty years when railroads were few and Indians were many, have borne the heat and burden of the day, and now this newcomer who scarcely goes beyond the limits of the city unless it suits his pleasure or convenience, mounts to the very top in a day, has a larger salary and an easier time than I have, while the people are running after him as if they were crazy, fools as they are. I will not stand it!"

So said the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff as he brought his big fist down upon the table with a thump that made the glasses and dishes jingle.

"I don't blame you, Topliff," said the preacher's companion, "only you will have to be careful to whom you say such things."

"Why should I be careful? Have I not the right to say what I please? Not only will I talk, but I will act! I have the authority and the power to drive him from his position and I will do it. If I can't do it one way, I will another if it——"

"Still I must caution you not only to be careful what you say, but still more careful what you do. You

must remember that Mr. Armby has many friends in X——, not only in his own church but in other churches and among people outside all the churches; and they may not quietly submit to the course you propose."

"D——n his friends! I have friends too, even in his own church. You don't think I have spent all these years in that country without making some friends, do you?"

"Now, doctor," insisted Mr. Sharply, "you and I fully understand each other. You are a gospeller and I am a lawyer. You can be a good deal of a sinner when you try and I can be something of a saint when it serves my purpose. You can swear a little when you feel like it and I can pray a whole lot when I have to. You can drink something stronger than water on occasions other than the sacrament. Indeed, I fear you are imbibing now to an extent which endangers your discretion. So we will postpone this matter 'until a more convenient season,' as you sometimes say. I will only add, that if everybody in X—— was your friend and at the same time the friend of Mr. Armby, and war should break out between you, the people would be against the one who began the fight. The dear people are sensitive about such matters. They expect peace among the preachers and will surely be with Armby if you make a fight upon him. Give me time to think the matter over and I may be able to make some suggestions that will help you out."

This conversation, with much that had preceded it, took place at a table in the Shoreham Café, in the city of Washington, D. C. The two men engaged in this

convivial tête-à-tête, had long been close friends, and there existed between them a perfect understanding. They were on a visit to the capital—the lawyer upon some business of a political character, the clergyman on a trip through the east on behalf of the Mission over which he presided. When at home, they were both Christians of the most orthodox type and belonged to the straitest sect of theoretical temperance advocates. When sufficiently far from home, they seemed to think that the eating of meat, or the drinking of a rich old wine or even something stronger was in no danger of making their brethren to offend; and, under the freedom from restraint which seemed so novel and delightful to the preacher, they would betake themselves to some quiet retreat and eat and drink to their hearts', or rather stomachs' content and sometimes discontent.

On this occasion, these congenial spirits cautiously entered the Shoreham Café late one wintry evening and sought a small table in an obscure corner where the light was somewhat dim, so that in case the unexpected happened and some one who knew them should come in, they might escape observation. The two friends feeling themselves secure, ordered and drank round after round of the choice beverages for which the Shoreham is so famous, until the liquors began to evoke from the minister that remnant of the demon which is said to reside in the nature of every man however much of a saint he may be. Hence his jealousy of the Rev. Albert Armby began to arouse and shake itself as an offended lion. His tongue, rendered indiscreet by the effects which vinous, malt

and spirituous liquors seem to exert upon that unruly member, began to give utterance to the envy and malice which rankled in his heart. His friend, who never allowed his libations to go so far as to drown his own wits, seeing that his reverend associate had drunk fully as much as was good for his health or his disposition, thought it time to bring their feasting and conversation to an end. Both left the café in the happy consciousness that they had come, had a good time together and were leaving unobserved. But one of the bar-tenders who had formerly lived in X——, whispered in the other's ear and nodded and smiled towards the departing couple in a manner that boded no good to the Rev. Dr. Topliff and the Hon. Mr. Sharply.

Mr. Sharply was the very highest type of that rare specimen of the genus homo known as the hypocrite. While there are many examples of inconsistency, they are few indeed, who deliberately impose upon others while they do not deceive themselves. The philosopher had no need to say to him, "Sharply, know thyself!" He was perfectly aware that he did not believe what he led others to think he believed; that he was not the sort of man he led others to think he was; in short, he knew that his whole life was a deliberate imposition upon all who believed in him. He had no twinges of conscience on account of this course. He rather enjoyed it. He felt a sort of pride in the fact that he was able, so successfully and for such a length of time to deceive so many people, and exulted over the triumphs he succeeded in achieving through his duplicity.

After all, it is hardly correct to say that Jacob Sharply exulted over his achievements; for there was scarcely enough of the emotional in his nature for exultation. He made his moves, checked and embarrassed his adversary until at last his opponent was crowded into a corner, hemmed in on all sides, defeated, crushed, ruined it might be. Then Jacob Sharply would sit back in his chair with a lighted cigar in his mouth, in the smoke of which he seemed to be thinking of something far remote from the victory he had just gained. If his thoughts had any connection at all with his success, it was in coolly tracing the movements he had made in leading up to it or scrutinizing closely the situation to satisfy himself that no further move was possible on the part of his opponent. That question settled to his satisfaction, he seemed to pay no more attention to the matter than the bronze chess player gives to the game after he has made the move which completes his victory. It was a dangerous thing to fall into the hands of Jacob Sharply.

There was one thing which, were it not for his motive, could be said to his credit, namely, that he was never known to betray the interests of his client. His one aim was to win. He rightly calculated that he had but to make for himself a reputation as a winner, and clients would flock to him like patients to the quack doctor who creates a reputation as a healer. Jacob Sharply was known to win his cases, and clients were numerous; for as a rule, those who go to law aim to win and are not overscrupulous as to the methods employed. There was no lack of clients with Mr. Sharply, and as he made them pay roundly

for his services and required them either to pay in advance or put up satisfactory security, he had grown rapidly rich until he was known to be, not only one of the most successful lawyers in X——, but one of the wealthiest citizens as well. He was, therefore, a man of great influence, and was often selected by his fellow-citizens to represent them in matters at the National Capital, where intricate, secret and not overscrupulous methods were required. It was upon some such business that he was a visitor to Washington, when learning that the Rev. Dr. Topliff was to make a trip through the east in search of funds for some scheme of his own in the west, he wrote to him to take in Washington on his trip. He knew that while the clergyman's cooperation would give moral character to his own schemes, he could make it to the financial advantage of the minister. Hence their presence at the Capital and their associations together. With this insight into Mr. Sharply's character and business methods it will be easier to appreciate the conversation between him and the Rev. Dr. Topliff.

The next morning the two friends met at table. After they had breakfasted, the clergyman said to the lawyer,

"Sharply, let us go up to my room a little while; I want to have some further talk with you."

Accordingly they went to a large comfortable room, richly carpeted and furnished with easy chairs, a divan and all else usually provided in a high class hotel for the convenience and comfort of its guests. When the two worthies were comfortably seated and had lighted their cigars, Dr. Topliff began the conversation by

commenting upon the quality of the Havanas which the lawyer, knowing the proclivities of his clerical friend, had provided.

"When I am at home, Sharply," said Topliff, "I have to offer incense in the privacy of my study, except when I take a whiff at your private office or in your library at home. Indeed, old fellow, I do not know what I should do without you. By the way, I didn't say anything last night which gave me away, did I?"

"N-no," replied his friend with some hesitation, "can't say that you did. But it would not have been wise to say what you did at other places I can think of, or to any other person."

The Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff was given to half repentant moods when recovering from over convivial indulgence, when he would make Mr. Sharply his father confessor. Topliff's confessions were generally composed in about equal parts of efforts to show his consistency and attempts to justify his conduct by citing the example of some notable character whom he resembled at least in his weaknesses and wrong-doing.

"Confound it!" said he, "whenever I mix my drinks, either before or after taking, they seem to befuddle my brain out of all reason and set my tongue to going at an alarming rate. Sharply, if other people knew what you know, they would call me a hypocrite. You know our church in its official declarations, is most pronounced in its opposition to drinking and even to the licensing of places to sell intoxicating liquors. I am with the church in this attitude. If I had my way, not a drop of the stuff should be sold or

even manufactured. So in principle I am a prohibitionist and entirely consistent in my advocacy of the doctrine on all proper occasions. But I like the blamed stuff and keep it in my home, under lock and key to be sure, in my own private desk; and when I am off on a trip like this I indulge a little as you know. I don't feel very comfortable about it; but it is with me as it was with Paul, 'for the good that I would, I do not ; but the evil which I would not, that I do.'"

"Well, Topliff," said Sharply, "I have given the matter of which you spoke last night, if you remember what that was, some thought and am confirmed in my opinion that it will not do for you to make any fight upon Mr. Armby either in words or acts—at least any that can be traced to you."

"Am I then, after so many years of toil and supremacy, to allow myself to be supplanted by a young man practically without experience, just because he happens to have a good appearance and a little learning?"

Mr. Sharply rather enjoyed seeing his friend fume and wince under the jealousy that agitated him. So he said between his puffs of smoke,

"Now, Doctor, you must not allow your feelings to prevent your doing Mr. Armby justice. Everybody concedes that he is a man of genuine ability. He has drawn to him, not only the masses of the common people, but the intellectual element of the city. There is nothing of the sensationalist in his methods, so that his popularity is liable to be enduring. Besides all that, Topliff, has he ever done you any wrong?"

"Whether he has or not," replied Topliff with in-

creasing passion, "either he or I must step down and out. You know that I have never had a man in that church, or in the whole Mission for that matter, who did not submit to my authority. Hitherto, if one of my preachers did not obey my instructions, I got rid of him. And I will get rid of Armby."

"Has he disobeyed you in any requirement you had a right to make of him?" inquired the lawyer.

"Not exactly that," said Topliff, "but he goes ahead with many important matters without asking my advice and consent; which, in view of my experience and position amounts to downright disrespect."

"I am on his official board, Doctor, and sometimes attend its meetings. Whether he advises with you in all things or not I cannot say; but I know he often lays before the board recommendations coming from you and always does so with becoming respect to your position and authority."

"And doubtless," said Topliff with much impatience, "after having gone about among his special friends on the board and told them what to do with my recommendations."

"Can't say as to that," said Mr. Sharply. "You are still determined to get rid of him?"

"All I have to say is, that if he remains in Trinity, I will resign and leave the Mission."

"Well, if that is decided, perhaps I can take the job off your hands and you need not have any apparent connection with it."

"How will you manage it, Sharply?" asked the preacher eagerly. At heart Topliff was the very essence of cowardice, Whenever he knew that he

had a man entirely at his mercy, he was as cruel and despotic as a tyrant. In the presence of his superiors, he was as cringing as a sycophant. When he had to contend with one of sufficient standing and ability to cope with him, he sought by any means to obtain an unfair advantage. Therefore he fairly jumped at the lawyer's proposal to take the fight off his hands. To his eager inquiry the lawyer said quietly,

"Nothing easier."

"But how will you go about it? How can it be done without my having anything to do with it?"

"I did not say you should have nothing to do with it," said Sharply. "I said you need have no apparent connection with it. If I am not mistaken, Topliff, that is exactly the way in which you have, for all the fifteen years I have known you, done every job for the doing of which you wished to escape responsibility. Very well. I have a motive which in this world's affairs ought to be stronger than yours. You commit the case to me as a client to a lawyer, obey my instructions and remain in the background. When the case is won, as it will be, you pay me my fee."

The Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff was not one of the Lord's poor. He had married a woman with a snug little fortune; and with her money had made some fortunate ventures in real estate, being careful that all deeds in the transactions should be made in his own name. He was surprised to have Mr. Sharply attach a fee as a condition to a voluntary service. He knew that while Sharply was not niggard in his use of money, he enjoyed almost passionately the pleasure of

acquiring it. After some reluctance which the lawyer did not fail to notice, he said,

"Of course, Sharply, I do not expect a man as busy as you are to employ his time and abilities in my interests for nothing. I will willingly pay you whatever is right."

He said this with all the more reluctance because while he enjoyed the reputation of being a man of large liberality, he was at heart as niggard as a miser. He had acquired his reputation for generosity by making, on all public occasions and with as much show as possible, liberal subscriptions to schools, churches and other similar enterprises, and then paying them out of the standing subscriptions of some wealthy men in the east, or out of the missionary and other funds of which he had the manipulation. The lawyer had arisen and was walking back and forth, watching closely the face of the preacher and reading to the very depths his innermost thoughts. At last he said,

"My fee in this case, Topliff, will be easy to pay. It will but require a little pleasant diplomacy on your part with a lady friend of yours."

While it was a relief to Topliff that he would not have to part with any of his wealth to satisfy the claims of the lawyer, he was greatly surprised at this suggestion, for he did not suppose that Sharply ever gave to the gentle sex more than a passing thought.

"With all my heart, Sharply," said the preacher. "But I cannot imagine any lady friend of mine in whom you can feel the slightest interest."

Sharply bent down until his lips were close to the preacher's ear, and said something which caused the

clergyman's eyes to open to twice their usual size and to look at the lawyer as if he thought him more than half crazy.

"By my faith, Sharply, that is a fee well worth the having. Rest assured, old boy, that I shall most cheerfully do anything in my power to bring the prize within your reach."

CHAPTER XIV

PHANTASMAGORIA

IMAGINE the disappointment, grief and humiliation of Albert Armby upon learning, soon after the return of Topliff and Sharply from Washington, that a petition was in circulation asking for a change in the pastorate of Trinity church. He had believed that his services were acceptable to his people. His congregations had filled the large building to its utmost capacity. His hearers had appeared to be interested and pleased with his sermons. The most intelligent, thoughtful and reliable people who attended upon his ministrations had often assured him that they but reflected the feelings of the congregation and of the city when they said for his encouragement, that never had they been served by a minister who gave such general satisfaction. There was a very large following of young people in this church and they flocked to Mr. Armby, with the feeling that they had in him a friend who understood them and sympathized with them, in whom they could implicitly trust and whose counsels they could safely follow.

Every department of the church work seemed to be in a prosperous condition, insomuch that the whole city understood that this church was a model of systematic, enthusiastic and successful Christian work. Mr. Armby was honored by his fellow-ministers as the

leader of such a church; and to his tireless activity, his consummate generalship, his ability and power as a preacher and his unselfish devotion to the interests of all, was attributed, more than to anything else, the position and commanding influence to which his church had attained. Besides all this, he sincerely and devotedly loved his people. His every sermon, visit to the homes of his people—whether to the mansions of wealth or hovels of poverty, whether on occasions of joy or in times of sorrow—everything he did was a labor of love. When, therefore, he was informed that a petition was in circulation, for the purpose of securing his removal from that church, it was a rude awakening from his fond delusions.

The tendency of the thoughts and feelings of a sensitive nature, is to swing from one extreme to another. Mr. Armby had been living in an atmosphere of mutual confidence, respect and affection. So he imagined. The question of whether or not his people trusted him and loved him, had given him no concern. He trusted them implicitly and loved them tenderly and deeply. Further than that he had taken no thought, other than to expend all his powers of mind and the energies of his body in their service. But when he learned, as he supposed, that they no longer desired his presence and his labors among them, he went immediately to the other extreme. As it appeared to him, he had all the time been deceived. His people did not believe in him; his preaching had not been satisfactory; he had not proved himself capable of rendering such service as they desired. The people whose affections he so much treasured did not love him. Then he lost con-

fidence in himself. It did not occur to him to blame any one else. The people were right. Of course they were! How foolish he had been to suppose that his ministrations could meet the requirements of such a congregation! True, they had come to hear him; but this had been owing to their loyalty to the church and their sympathy for him. How considerate they had been!

But why did they not come and frankly tell him all about it? If they had but sent a committee! But no! He had no right to expect that. It was much easier and much less embarrassing to get a few names signed to a paper than it would have been to tell him to his face that he was not acceptable to them and that therefore there must be a change. No, he would not blame them.

He went to his room and shut himself in that night. He was ashamed to see any one or to have any one see him. He tried to think but his thoughts were all confused. He tried to plan, but nothing would take definite form in his perplexed brain. He recollected that his sermon was not completed for the following Sunday morning, and tried to do something more towards its preparation; but then it came to him that he could not endure to appear before his people again.

"I will never enter another pulpit!" thought he. He had erred, as it seemed to him, in the hope he had indulged, that it was his duty as well as his high privilege to preach the gospel of Christ. It was not to him merely a conviction of duty from which he shrank and against which he struggled yet dared not resist. It was rather a privilege to which he did not dare as-

pire. In his estimation, the work of the Christian ministry was as much above any secular employment as heaven is high above the earth. To him its themes were the grandest that could inspire a human mind or engage a human tongue. Without intending it, he found himself drawn into this work as into a labor of love. But in his hour of doubt, and perhaps his hour of temptation, he said, "how foolish I was that I did not continue in my practice of law, instead of allowing myself to be attracted to a work too great for any ordinary man. I will return to my law and give place to some other who is better fitted for the work."

It might, indeed, have been weakness in this man to give way under this unexpected opposition. However, he had proved more than once that he knew how to meet and to conquer opposition if it came from without. He was simply overwhelmed under his sense of unworthiness and incompetency.

It was long after midnight when he threw himself upon his bed in hope of finding in sleep, temporary relief at least, from his disappointment and humiliation. In this despondent mood, he tossed sleeplessly upon his bed until the eastern sky began to grow gray with approaching dawn, before he found relief in repose from the cares which so distressed his mind.

In his disturbed sleep, he dreamed that the hour for the forenoon service on the Sabbath was at hand and that, as was his custom, he was alone in his study adjoining the pulpit of his church. He made a memorandum of the hymns that were to be sung, the scripture lessons to be read and the text from which his sermon was to be preached. The organ struck up a

prelude while the great congregation was assembling. But the tone of the organ seemed harsh and discordant. He took advantage of the few remaining moments to refer to his memorandum to assure himself that no mistake had been made as to the hymns or scripture selections. To his great confusion, there were no hymns in his book or passages in his Bible corresponding to the numbers on his memorandum. The prelude ceased, which was the usual signal for him to enter his pulpit. He pushed open the door leading from his study and took a few steps on the platform before looking up. As he lifted his eyes he stopped as if petrified. In the seats usually occupied by his choir, there were two old men whom he had never seen, each with his bald head bent forward on a book so as to conceal his face. Instead of the organist who usually presided at the organ, was an old man like the other two, his head bent forward on the organ keys so that his face could not be seen. He felt a chill come over him which seemed to strike to the marrow of his bones and freeze the very blood in his heart. He stepped to the pulpit which he found to be covered over with snow and fringed with icicles. He looked out over the great audience room. It was entirely empty, except here and there an old man exactly like the other three, with his head bowed upon the seat in front of him. He opened his Bible which felt like a block of ice in his hands. To his amazement, he discovered that it was printed in characters wholly unintelligible to him. He looked for his hymnbook and memorandum, but they were nowhere to be seen. He glanced about the building only to discover

that the great windows had been supplied with glass which gave everything an ashen hue. The seats, the frescoed walls, the perfectly motionless and silent old men were of the color of ashes. He looked at his own hands. They were ashen also. He tried to retrace his steps and return to his study, but found he had lost the power to move and was fixed to his place as if he had been a man of stone. He closed his eyes to shut out the horrible sight. As he did so, he felt something warm touch their lids. He opened them to find the room flooded with a delicious light and thronged with eager people whose familiar faces were looking trustfully up into his, waiting for him to speak, while a low sweet melody from the organ was dying away upon their listening ears. He awoke from his sleep to find that the morning sun was several hours above the horizon and was shining full in his face while some one in the room below was gently playing on the piano the melody which he had heard in his dream.

Night has the power to magnify our fears and exaggerate our difficulties. Man no more thinks clearly than he sees plainly in the dark. Daylight chases the shadows from the earth and the phantoms from our minds. Now that Armby had awakened from his sleep, partaken of a wholesome breakfast and sat looking out into the sunlight of a cloudless day, he began to get a clearer vision of the situation.

"How extensive is this movement to secure my removal? How many names are there to this petition? To what extent do they represent the church and community? Is it wise for me to yield to this opposition without knowing more about it?"

With such questions as these pressing for answers, he was not long in deciding that the best course for him to pursue was to take counsel with some of the clearest-headed and truest men of his church. He was a man of action; hence he was soon closeted with a few of his trusted advisers. He learned that his friends had not been idle, but were prepared to furnish him much valuable information. The paper had been signed by perhaps a dozen men and women out of a congregation of a thousand people. Some of these were quite prominent in the church, it must be admitted; among them being Jacob Sharply. All the signers were known to be bosom friends of the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff.

One of Armby's advisers asked him the pointed question whether or not Dr. Topliff were friendly to him.

"So far as I know," replied Armby. "I have never thought anything about it. I know of no reason why he should not be. He always seems very friendly when we meet."

"You can't tell anything by that. There has never been a man of any ability and influence at the head of this church of whom he has not become jealous. He has driven every man who has had substance enough to cast a shadow, out of the Mission. If you will dig deep enough, I think you will find him at the bottom of the whole transaction."

This was a new phase of the matter to Albert Armby.

"Well," said he, "I want to do what is best for this church. If I thought it would be to its interests for me to go, I would do so at any cost."

"You simply go about your business, Mr. Armby, as if nothing had happened. We will attend to this affair."

The news had gotten abroad that a movement was on foot to secure Mr. Armby's removal; and, true or untrue, that the movement was in the interest of Dr. Topliff. There was as great a stir in Trinity church as there is in a colony of bees when their hive has received a sudden jar. The church rallied about him with intense enthusiasm; some of the people who had signed the paper came and assured him with tears in their eyes that their signatures were secured by false representations, and begged him to forgive them. The young people especially were up in arms and besought him for permission to start a counter petition. This he firmly refused, saying,

"Be patient. 'Least said, soonest mended.'" His manly bearing and spirit of conciliation won the people to him as never before.

A business meeting of the church was called. When the ordinary routine of business had been transacted and the meeting was about to adjourn, a highly respected and influential member of the church arose.

"Mr. Chairman," said he, "I arise to a question of privilege. It is well known that a petition is in circulation requesting that there be a change in the pastorate of this church. It may also be known that my name is attached to the petition. I take this opportunity to explain that my signature was secured by the representation that our present pastor had under consideration at the time, a call to a much more inviting pulpit, and that he desired to accept, but would not if

Trinity desired him to remain. Had I given the matter much thought, I would have known that a petition is not the best way for the church to express its wishes. I have since learned from Mr. Armby himself, that the invitation was promptly declined and that he had no desire whatever to leave Trinity. Offended by the imposition, I made a thorough investigation and have satisfied myself as to the parties at the bottom of this movement and the motive that prompted them. I denounce the whole proceedure, and give notice that if it is persisted in, I shall expose its promoters and the animus of their conduct. Before taking my seat I will offer for adoption the following:

> '*Resolved*, That Trinity church is thoroughly satisfied with its present pastor, and hereby assures him of its undiminished confidence and love.'

Mr. Chairman, I move the adoption of this resolution and demand a rising vote."

There was a chorus of seconds as the speaker took his seat, and a dozen men were on their feet demanding recognition from the Chair.

"I think I heard Colonel Blakeslee's voice first," said the Chairman.

"I do not arise to make a speech," said the Colonel. "Prompted by strong feeling, some of us might say too much should we indulge in a general discussion. Without indicating how I shall vote, I move the previous question."

When a vote was taken, every man—Jacob Sharply included—was on his feet.

CHAPTER XV

PLEASANT DIPLOMACY

THE Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff, taking advantage of his clerical character, presumed upon a familiarity with people of prominence and refinement, unwarranted either by his intellectual attainments or his sense of propriety. He took the liberty of calling at the homes of the wealthy and influential families of the city whenever it suited his pleasure, and was free with his advice, whether it was desired or not. In the matter of match-making, he rated himself an adept. He had early offended Colonel Blakeslee by his attempts to foist upon that gentleman a wife not of his choosing.

One afternoon Dr. Topliff called at the Blakeslee residence and found Evelyn alone. This suited his purpose. Evelyn shared in her father's dislike of the big clergyman, though she always treated him with the respect due one of his calling.

"Evelyn," he said at length, "it is a wonder to me that some worthy man hasn't selected you for his partner."

"Partner in what?" asked Evelyn, assuming ignorance of his meaning.

"Why, partner for life, to be sure."

"Oh! And why should you wonder at that?"

"The man who wins Evelyn Blakeslee wins the pick of the flock."

"Dr. Topliff, you but flatter me. If you knew what a virago I am! But, Doctor, I am not in the market."

"No? Perhaps the right bidder has not come along. I confess that he who carries off such a prize must bid high."

Topliff had felt his way with such caution and with a show of merriment that left Evelyn in doubt as to whether he was not altogether jocular in his conversation. Knowing his penchant for negotiating matrimonial alliances, and having a vein of the mischievous in her nature, she resolved to give him just enough encouragement to lead him into a full revelation of any schemes he might have.

"If I am such a prize as you seem to think, Doctor, you would not expect me to be easily won, would you?"

"Indeed not! I should expect the fortunate man to give *quid pro quo*—value received you know."

"I am afraid the terms upon which I would consider marriage are such as no man could comply with."

"They must be hard terms indeed, if some worthy man would not submit to them for the sake of——"

"There, Doctor; I will not allow any more of your flattery."

"I was not intending to flatter you—indeed that would be hard to do. But what are the difficult terms you would propose?"

"I would not even think of marrying any one who

is not as good a man as my father and who would not be as kind to me as he is."

"That is indeed a hard condition; for a better man —a more indulgent father cannot be found!"

"I thank you heartily, Dr. Topliff."

"Let me tell you," said Topliff, "what the man who would become your husband ought to bring to you."

"By all means, Doctor. That will be interesting."

"Well, he ought to bring you a good character and reputation."

"That's a good beginning, Doctor. What else?"

"He should be a man of undoubted intelligence, and he should have good social standing and plenty of money. All these you have to give, and are entitled to receive."

"There is one thing you have omitted, Doctor."

"And what is it?"

"Don't you think I deserve a handsome man?"

"Beauty is but skin deep, and 'handsome is that handsome does.'"

"Have you some one in mind whom you think would fill the bill?"

"I have often thought that a certain man I could mention would make you an excellent husband—though he is a good deal older than you are."

"O, you would have me become an old man's darling?"

"He is not an old man by any means—he is just in the prime of life."

"Oh! Who is he? You have excited my curiosity, you see."

"I will describe him and let you guess. He is a wealthy man of this city."

"There are a good many such."

"He is an eminent lawyer."

"There are several of them, though not many who are single."

"He is a prominent member of Trinity church, and a bachelor."

"I must be stupid not to guess; but there are three or four I can think of who might answer the description."

"There is but one whose name deserves to be mentioned in the same breath with yours."

"I give it up, Doctor. You will have to tell me outright."

"Well, I think any woman, not even excepting present company, ought to consider herself fortunate to have the Hon. Jacob Sharply for her suitor."

At the mention of Sharply's name, Evelyn burst into a hearty laugh, while Topliff twisted about in his chair undecided whether it were the better policy to join in her merriment or assume to feel offended. Evelyn recovered herself and hastened to apologize for her levity.

"Forgive me, Doctor, it all seems so ridiculous that I——" here she gave way to another hearty laugh.

This decided Topliff's course. He arose with pompous dignity.

"If you take my well-meant suggestions so lightly, my presence cannot be agreeable to you."

He had unalterably committed himself. He could not now fall back upon mere pleasantry—he was in downright earnest.

"Do not go, Doctor. I did not suppose you were in earnest."

Topliff resumed his seat while Evelyn by a strong effort restrained her desire to treat the whole matter with derision.

"I was never more in earnest," said the clergyman, committing himself still more irrevocably. "Mr. Sharply is all I have claimed for him and even more."

Evelyn changed her whole manner. She too became serious and inquired almost severely,

"Well, Doctor, since you are so much in earnest, I would like to know whether or not you come with his knowledge and consent."

This unexpected demand threw the emissary into some confusion. He did not relish the idea of lying to her outright, nor yet did he wish to confess the whole truth.

"Well—not exactly; yet I happen to know that—that Mr. Sharply is thinking very seriously of ——"

"Am I to understand then that I have been the theme of a matrimonial discussion between you and Mr. Sharply?" demanded Evelyn, her cheeks coloring and her eyes flashing indignation.

"You must not be offended, Evelyn," said the preacher. "We men often talk these matters over among ourselves without meaning any disrespect. I assure you Mr. Sharply has only the most honorable intentions."

"In that case, why should this subject be canvassed between you? If he had such intentions why did he not come like a man and make them known himself?"

Topliff was taken aback by Evelyn's indignant demands and sought to cajole her.

"Come, Evelyn, do not be offended. No disrespect was intended, I assure you. Mr. Sharply simply asked me to speak a good word for him. As an old friend of his and of your father's I consented to do so."

"I think my father would not thank you for this impertinence. To Mr. Sharply I have no reply to make. To you I will say that this matter must never be mentioned to me again."

"Why, Evelyn, you must——"

"Not another word on this subject. If you have anything else you wish to talk about, well and good; if not——" Evelyn checked herself, but Topliff could not mistake her meaning.

"Really, Evelyn, I am sorry I said anything about it. I surely meant no harm, and I hope you will not take offense. Let us part the good friends we have always been. I should be grieved to think that Evelyn Blakeslee is angry with me."

"Perhaps I was hasty," replied Evelyn. "At all events I shall not nurse my resentment. It is said that anger dwells in the breast of fools, and I trust I am not one of them."

A few days after Topliff's unsuccessful interview with Evelyn Blakeslee, he was closeted with Jacob Sharply in the latter's private office.

"Just returned to the city, Topliff. Anything new?"

"Nothing special."

"Anything more about the Armby matter?"

"Nothing that I care to know or to repeat."

"I take it that what you know is not very complimentary to us, eh? By the way, have you played the diplomat with the queen of Sheba yet?"

"Yes, and I think the man who stands in my way, stands also in yours."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, I was unable to make any impression upon her. My wife tells me that it is pretty well understood among Trinity people that Armby is in love with her, while some go so far as to say that they are engaged. I put this and that together and draw my conclusion."

"Humph!" exclaimed the lawyer.

"She did not say a word against you, Sharply, though she became very angry when she knew that you and I had talked the matter over between us."

"I don't know that that's a very bad sign. I have had precious little experience in matrimonial negotiations; but I know that when I get the drop on a fellow in a suit, the first thing he does is to brag and bluster; the next, he surrenders. It may be so with women."

"But you haven't the drop on Evelyn Blakeslee."

"Maybe I can get the drop, or what amounts to the same thing, on her suitor."

"What good will that do?"

"She is like all the rest of them. Take one bauble out of their way and they will run after another. Evelyn Blakeslee is enamored with the fine appearance and the great popularity of Armby. Destroy the glamour and she may be attracted by the professional and social standing, by the wealth or the supposed wealth of Jacob Sharply."

"But she commanded me rather peremptorily never to mention the matter again."

"And yet, under changed conditions she might be glad to have you mention it."

"Sharply, I cannot understand your determination to capture Evelyn Blakeslee. I did not suppose you cared a fig for her or any other woman."

"You forget that Colonel Blakeslee is worth a cool million. I don't care a tinker's damn for his daughter. It's the fortune I'm after."

"There's another thing I want to speak to you about, Sharply. How was it that when it came to a vote the other night on the Armby resolutions, you voted in favor of them?"

"You're an old ninny! Don't you see that if I had voted against them or even refrained from voting at all, the whole responsibility for the opposition would have been saddled on to me? By voting with the crowd, I stand in with them and keep in position to renew the fight."

"Do you propose to renew the fight for his removal from Trinity?"

"It's no use, Topliff. He is too strong with his people. The impression has gotten abroad that the movement was in your interest and that you were probably at the bottom of it. The result is that he is stronger with his church than ever, while you have been greatly damaged in the estimation of the people."

Topliff was greatly offended by this statement of Sharply's and was disposed to resent it.

"You need not take the matter so much to heart, Topliff. I told you once before that if either of you

should assail the other, the people would side with the assailed against the assailant. If he had attempted some such movement against you, the people would have been against him. Some of your fool friends talked too much about Dr. Topliff as the successor of Armby, and the impression has gone out that you at least winked at the project."

"Well then, am I to submit to this humiliation and disadvantage? Is this peacock to go on strutting before the community while I take my place in the fence corner like a whipped cock? You remember what you promised. Are you going to give up with this one effort?"

"There are two sides to our bargain, Topliff. You well know that you promised to do a certain thing for me in return. I think I have made about as much progress in carrying out my part of the agreement as you have in carrying out yours."

"I have done all I could. It is no fault of mine if Evelyn Blakeslee does not take a fancy to you."

"For that matter," said the lawyer coolly, "I have done what I could and it is no fault of mine if the dear people do not seem to take a fancy to you."

This remark stung the clergyman to the quick, as it was intended to do. The lawyer saw that he had hit his mark and then added, "I do not blame you, Topliff, in that you have not met with success; neither should you blame me for having thus far failed. When did you know me to give up after I once set about a thing? Now the fact is that this man Armby stands between me and Evelyn Blakeslee, and at the same time stands between you and the dear people.

We have, therefore, a common enemy. Let us make common cause."

"Well, what do you propose next?"

"He is in your way and also in mine. The only thing is to get him out of the way."

"You don't mean to k——"

"Not exactly. There are but two ways: one is to do as you were about to suggest——"

"I made no such suggestion, Sharply. I was only asking——"

"I know, Topliff; you were thinking about it and were about to speak of it and that suggested it to my mind, therefore I say that as you were about to suggest. There is another way which is meaner yet, but not so dangerous—namely strike at his reputation. Strip him of his good name, and he will be out of your way and out of mine."

The preacher sat in silence for a few moments as if considering the statement of the lawyer in all its bearings. At length he said,

"A minister's good name is as fragile as a woman's. Both are like a piece of rare pottery: they are beautiful to behold and greatly admired, but easily broken and can never be mended. But we would have to make sure work of it. No mere talk or suspicion would shake the confidence of these idiots in Armby; they would as soon expect the heavens to fall as believe him guilty of any wrong-doing."

"I am a lawyer and know what proof is required to convict a man. I will make the evidence against him so strong that he will believe it himself. But it will require money and plenty

of it and you will have to come down with the cash."

"Now, Sharply, I haven't much money and ——"

"You know very well, Topliff, that you needn't talk poverty to me. I know too much about you. Either you will or you won't and that's all there is to it. If you don't care to furnish your share of the funds, we'll just drop the matter where it is and swallow our recent defeat with as good faces as we can put on; but yours, I venture, will be a wry one."

"How much will it require to see the matter through?"

"A thousand dollars at least—maybe more. You will have to furnish half of it. I will look after the balance."

"Well, that seems dreadfully expensive; but I would give twice that sum, if necessary, to humble the pride of this upstart and drive him out of the city. But what will this money be used for? I do not see ——"

"I do," interrupted the lawyer. "It does not take long to use up a thousand dollars in hiring expensive men to furnish evidence of something that never happened. Accomplished villainy comes high."

"I would like to know something more definite about your plans."

"Well, I intend to compromise him hopelessly with a woman."

"What woman? Any one in particular?"

"That little witch of an Edna Lee."

Topliff's eyes fairly glistened with diabolical in-

terest. He leaned over towards the lawyer and said eagerly,

"Compromise him with her, and I will pay the whole expense myself. Here, I will make you my check for——"

"Checks are ugly things sometimes, we might have to explain what the check was for. I much prefer the cash."

CHAPTER XVI

WHISPERINGS

If Edna Lee had not been carried away by the old impulsive and headstrong feeling which had been a marked trait of her character in former years, nothing could have induced her to undertake the feat of reckless daring at the State Fair. But she had seen her horse come on the track, admired by all beholders. She knew what he could do, and would do with pride if properly handled. But when she saw the cruel lash laid upon him and witnessed the fury of his rage, she had no more control over herself than the driver had over the horse.

Imagine her vexation when she saw her name prominently mentioned in the city papers, and found herself the subject of conversation among thousands of people. All the newspapers with one exception, spoke in high praise of the dash, skill and courage displayed in bringing victory out of apparent defeat for the horse. The one paper mentioned the matter with a fling, and with an insinuation of immodesty which stung her to the quick. She was all the more indignant at this insinuation for the reason that of late she had noticed in this paper an occasional slighting reference to Mr. Armby and his work. Most of the people, including nearly all the men, had only words of praise

for the plucky little woman; though some, principally women, saw in her conduct only a boldness and an audacity which no woman of becoming modesty would have displayed.

The fact is, that for some time there had been no small amount of whisperings which were not to the advantage of Edna Lee. What were these whisperings? Nothing! Who started them? Who was the first whisperer? No one! If all the people of X—— had been asked if they had heard anything derogatory to the good name of Edna Lee, many of them would have said yes! If each one had been asked personally if he had started the said whisperings, he would have indignantly answered no! Did any one know anything derogatory to the character and good name of Edna Lee? No! How did it happen then that what no one had done had been done by so many? How came it that what no one had ever professed to know, was apparently known by everybody?

Edna knew nothing of all this. She went about her business wholly unconscious that so many tongues were busy with her name.

A million deadly disease germs swarm the air. The passer-by, all unconscious of their existence, goes through the midst of them. They swarm about his ears and eyes and mouth and nose; he inhales them with every breath, yet knows not that they even exist. But they mean to him long days and nights—weeks and months it may be—of racking pain, of burning fever, of delirious dreams; they mean poisoned blood, tainted breath, wasted body, pallid cheek, sunken

eyes and all too often the death agony, the winding sheet, the grave.

Likewise one may walk amidst the whisperings of a thousand tongues wholly unconscious that they exist—whisperings so low that he cannot hear them however near; yet they mean to him or to her, days and nights, nay weeks and months and years it may be, of anxiety, of anguish of heart, of bitter tears, of discouragement, the loss of friends, of position, of hope; all too often it means the despair that ends in crime, in a desperate life and a much more desperate death.

A mob in its frenzy, each member shifting the responsibility to the others, will drag a poor, defenseless, helpless, probably guilty but possibly innocent victim through the streets, and amid the fiendish jeers of the crowd, assault, mutilate and disfigure the bleeding body until death comes to his relief. A mob of men will join to do such a deed when any individual of the mob would draw back in horror if it were proposed that he, with his own hands, single and alone, do the bloody deed. Nevertheless, every member of the mob, whether he strikes a blow or not, is as guilty before the law and in the sight of God, as if he alone committed the crime.

Even so the one who joins the many in traducing the good name of a fellow-creature and sends that creature out into the struggle of life to find herself suspicioned, despised and spurned until life becomes too great a burden longer to endure; until driven into a frenzy of despair, she flies into the face of destiny and of God, is as guilty of the assassination of her

character and the murder of her body, as if he alone had committed the awful deed.

More than once, when Armby left Edna's home after spending a part of the evening with her, a man, muffled up to the ears, stood in the shadow of a tree. When Armby had passed by, this man carefully noted something in a book and then followed the minister to his home. For months, day and night, his every movement had been thoroughly watched. Armby paid no attention to the men who were on his track. He no more thought himself watched, than he thought of spying upon the movements of others. Nevertheless, in a certain office which he often visited and where he was received with demonstrations of welcome, he could have been told at any time all that he had done these many weeks.

Armby was a man who stood neither upon ceremony nor appearances. He went any place where he believed he was needed. No hovel was too low, no quarter too disreputable for him to visit upon his Master's business. He had but to know that the sick or dying had need of his presence. He believed that one whose soul was afflicted with sorrow or despair was even in more urgent need of Christian ministry than those afflicted with bodily disease. A call from such was as imperative to him as if the Master had stood at his side and said "go!"

One evening about dusk, he heard a nervous knock at his study door.

"Come in!" was Albert's welcome response to all comers. Upon turning in his office chair to greet his visitor he was astonished to see Edna Lee standing in

the half-open door. Anxiety and sadness were pictured upon her face.

"Why, Miss Lee! What——"

"Excuse this interruption, Mr. Armby. I have come to ask if you can go to see a little friend of mine who is dying. I have been to her every day, but she says she wants to see Mr. Armby."

Edna's eyes were moist and her voice tremulous with feeling. By the time she had made her request Armby had donned his hat, slipped on a light overcoat and stood ready to go.

"Where shall I go and for whom shall I enquire?"

"I have my horse and buggy and will take you."

Within three minutes they were in the light buggy behind the black horse, whirling down the street to the bedside of a dying child. They entered a humble cottage, the exterior of which bore every mark of neglect, while within, it was the abode of respectable poverty. Cleanliness and scarcity were everywhere evident. The widowed mother sat weeping beside the child, her grown daughter standing, with swollen eyes at the foot of the bed. Albert recognized this daughter as one of Edna's sewing girls.

"Mrs. Lovelace," said Edna, "this is Mr. Armby."

The sick child was lying in a stupor; but at the sound of Edna's voice, she opened her eyes while a sweet smile overspread her thin face. Edna was at her side in an instant, holding the little wasted hands while she tenderly kissed the child's brow.

"I was dreaming about you," said the girl, "and thought you were dressed in white and had white flowers in your hair. O, you were so beautiful!"

The child's face was radiant, while her lustrous black eyes glowed with unnatural light. There was a strange sweetness in her weakened voice which thrilled Albert's heart with mingled pleasure and pain.

"Helen," said Edna, "Mr. Armby has come to see you."

The child turned her head towards Albert, the smile still lighting up her face.

"And he was with you in my dream!"

Edna yielded her place to Albert.

"And you wanted to see me, Helen?" said he.

"Yes. I have heard you preach. Once you told us that because God loves us so, we ought to love Him. I have loved Him ever since. It is so sweet to love! I have loved you too, Mr. Armby, and Miss Lee."

"I am glad that you love me, Helen, but gladder still that you love God. We all love you."

"I know you do,—you love everybody!"

After an hour spent in this humble home, whose brightest light was so rapidly burning out, Albert and Edna took their leave and drove leisurely to Edna's home. They rode in silence for a time. At length he said,

"I never saw so bright a mind in one of her years. I am so glad that you came for me. I shall be a better man for having met this child!"

"She has done more to banish my doubts than all the preaching I have ever heard," replied Edna.

"What a pity she cannot live. With suitable opportunities, what a bright future she might have."

"It don't seem right to me that such a girl should have such surroundings."

"I have never been ambitious to be rich, and yet I have often longed for wealth that I might carry out some ideas I have. I would like to establish a home for friendless children and another for friendless women."

It was Armby's devotion to the unfortunate in every station of life that had won Edna to him and to his church. And when he outlined to her the work he would carry out if he had the means, her face fairly glowed with enthusiasm.

"And you would let me help you, wouldn't you?"

"You know, Miss Lee, that I am always glad to have you help me."

"It is very little that I can do, Mr. Armby."

"More than you think. It is much, very much to me to know that I have your sympathy and good will."

Often after this conversation, Albert would find an envelope in the contribution basket, marked "For the friendless children!" The name of the donor never appeared, but the contents of the envelopes would have done credit to a liberal soul of ample means. As it was, they came from the hands of a little woman who earned her living with her needle, whose faith did not go much beyond the pulpit of the church she attended, but who had a large place in her heart for the children in need of help.

Albert's next call upon Edna was shortly after the incident at the State Fair. In the course of their conversation, he said to her with more than ordinary feeling in his voice,

"I want to tell you, Miss Lee, that I know very well where the contributions for the friendless children come from."

Edna colored deeply and was about to deny that she had anything to do with it; but there was something that checked her. She said within herself, "No! I must not try to deceive this man," and kept silent. He added,

"I am afraid you are giving more than you can afford to give."

"Mr. Armby, pray say nothing more about it. I know you will use the little I can spare much more wisely than I could. It will be a favor to me if you will continue to do so."

"God bless you, Edna,—I beg your pardon, I——"

"Never mind, Mr. Armby. It seems good to have some one speak to me as my dear foster parents used to do."

"Thank you! I was about to say that what you give shall be devoted to the purpose for which it is given and used as wisely as I know how to use it."

"You have no need to tell me that. I know it full well. But there is another matter about which I have wanted to speak to you."

Here she colored again and showed no little embarrassment.

"Have no hesitation in saying to me anything you wish," said Albert encouragingly.

"Well, you have heard all about that escapade of mine at the fair. I have wished very much for an opportunity to explain to you——"

"No explanation whatever is necessary. I was present and saw it all; and when you came out victorious, I found myself on my feet, waving my hat and shouting with the rest of them."

The tears were in Edna's eyes. She feared lest she had suffered in his estimation; but now she finds to her joy that he saw it all and approved.

"But," said she, "while you witnessed what happened, you cannot understand what my feelings were. When I saw the driver with the whip in his hand after having faithfully promised not to carry one, I was beside myself with anger. I knew what the result would be if he so much as touched the horse with it. When I left my seat, it was to demand that the whip be given up. As I was making my way through the crowd and just as I reached the fence, I saw him strike the horse. You saw how frantic with rage my horse became. Well, some old reckless spirit seemed to take possession of me and without thinking for a moment, or caring, to tell the truth, how it would look or what the people would think, I found myself behind the horse, flying over the track."

"I was within a few feet of you when you arose to leave the stand. I had never seen such an expression on your face. I knew that something was wrong and soon understood it all."

"Well, while I regret that it ever happened, I should probably do the same thing again under similar circumstances. Since you do not blame me, I could not have done anything very bad and shall feel much more comfortable about it."

Mr. Armby took his leave, shadowed as before by the mysterious watcher.

The same evening, after Edna had retired, it occurred to her for the first time, to pay some attention to the feeling she entertained for this handsome young min-

ister. From the first, she had been strongly attracted to him and had felt a great admiration for him. Her attachment—if so strong a word may be used—strengthened as she came to know more of him and of his work. His conversation that evening, his approval of her conduct at the fair, his sympathy with her in the matter of her contributions, his calling her by her first name, all tended to awaken within her a feeling which amounted, perhaps, to more than admiration.

"I love Albert Armby? Never! What would it avail me if I should? Who am I—what am I—to fall in love with such a man? How foolish I am to think of such a thing! How does one know that she loves? Why is it that his presence brings me so much pleasure? Why am I forever thinking of him? Pooh! Have I not long since determined never to love any one?"

That is all very well, Miss Edna Lee; but have you not learned that the heart does not choose, but simply loves and that too, sometimes, against the will and contrary to all sense and reason? that it is incorrigibly perverse and will take its own course in spite of the cooler counsels of the head? The mountain-top may be wreathed in snow, but the volcano burns on beneath.

"Then, he is engaged, so they say, to the rich and popular Evelyn Blakeslee. For me to love him would be to thrust my hands, nay my heart into the fire. If I cannot go to his church without making the fatal mistake of falling in love with him, I will stay away. I will leave the city—will go so far away that I shall

never hear of him again, before I will be guilty of such folly!"

Thus Edna thought and resolved, not knowing that love, like gravitation, reaches to all distances; and, unlike gravitation, is not diminished in its strength by the intervention of space. Neither did she know, as at last she fell asleep, into what a hell she was to be plunged, into what a heaven lifted, by her love for Albert Armby.

CHAPTER XVII

A THUNDERBOLT

EDNA LEE'S home was situated at the corner of Maple and Sixth Streets, fronting on the former which was one of the principal streets of the city. Sixth Street was a narrow thoroughfare from which there was a side entrance through a small porch into Edna's private room. This room was separated by draperies, from a large room fronting on Maple Street which was used as a parlor and reception-room. The block opposite Edna's home on Sixth Street, was occupied by a public school building which stood back in the middle of the lot some distance from the street. This street was not only narrow, but was so poorly lighted that it can scarcely be said to have been lighted at all.

An unusual thing happened; Mrs. Topliff paid a visit to Edna Lee. She was shown into the parlor and Edna was informed of her presence.

"I have long intended to make you a social call," said the visitor, "but have neglected it for no good reason. I wanted to see you on a matter of business and so concluded to kill two birds with one stone."

Edna had learned to dislike Mrs. Topliff, but felt that she must treat her civilly.

"Really, Mrs. Topliff," said she, "I am kept so busy with my work that I have little time for sociability or anything else."

"You do not go into society much, then?"

"Scarcely at all. Most of my evenings are spent riding. Occasionally I go to the theatre and on Sundays to church."

"What church do you attend?"

"Trinity."

"They had some trouble in that church recently."

"I had not heard of it."

"Have not heard of it! Didn't you know that a petition had been circulated for Mr. Armby's removal?"

Edna knew that Mrs. Topliff was not at all friendly to Armby and shrewdly concluded to draw her out, or, as the old saying is, give her rope.

"I had heard of that," she replied, "but did not know there was any trouble about it. I understand that the movement was killed by a unanimous vote at a business meeting of the church."

"Yes," said Mrs. Topliff, "but I happen to know that some whose names were on the petition voted for the resolution."

"Well, Mrs. Topliff, do you think that was real honest?"

"Whether it was or not," replied Mrs. Topliff with some spirit, "if it had been my husband and such a paper had been circulated he would have resigned."

"Perhaps Mr. Armby is not so sensitive as Mr. Topliff and has not the same high sense of honor," said Edna archly.

"I know he hasn't," replied the visitor. "If Armby does not resign after being asked to go, he may wish he had."

"I entirely agree with you, Mrs. Topliff," said Edna. "If a minister will not go when his church wants to get rid of him, he ought to be compelled to leave."

Mrs. Topliff was delighted. At last she had found one of Armby's congregation who was of her own way of thinking. At this moment Edna's presence was required in the sewing-room.

"You will excuse me a few moments."

"Certainly!"

While Edna was out, Mrs. Topliff hurriedly examined the room, pushed aside the draperies, entered Edna's private chamber, tried the outside door, resumed her seat and was quietly scanning a fashion book when Edna returned.

"Do you like Mr. Armby's preaching, Miss Lee?"

"O, as well as any. The fact is that there are very few preachers I care to hear. As a rule they are not interesting; and what is worse, I think that some of them are not very honest."

"Do you think that of Mr. Armby?"

"I would not want to be so personal as that. He is a good speaker and may be honest enough for what I know."

"How would you like to make a practical test of his honesty?"

"In what way, Mrs. Topliff?"

"Do you know that there are lots of people who believe he thinks a good deal of you?"

"Of me!"

"Yes, of you. Does he not pay marked attention to you? Does he not always show a good deal of pleasure when he meets you? Does he not often come to

see you? What other woman does he visit as often as he does you? Where else does he spend as many evenings as he does here? You are blind if you do not see that there is something in all this."

"But, Mrs. Topliff, is he not engaged to Miss Blakeslee?"

Mrs. Topliff leant forward towards Edna and lowered her voice as she replied,

"Not that anybody knows of. But if he is, what of it? Evelyn Blakeslee may be his sweetheart, but it is your own fault if you do not have him for your lover."

There was an expression on Mrs. Topliff's face and a significance in her tone and manner that could leave no doubt of the meaning of her words. A pet panther may be a pretty plaything but exceedingly dangerous when enraged. Edna's mild blue eyes suddenly assumed a greenish hue while a blaze of wrath and indignation flashed from them before which Mrs. Topliff shrank and cowered as she would before a panther crouching for its leap. With a supreme effort Edna controlled herself.

"And this from you, a minister's wife! And this is the business concerning which you have come to see me!" Then pointing to the door, she continued: "Leave instantly and never darken my door again!"

Mrs. Topliff slunk from the room, glad to escape the fury she had provoked.

"Did you call on Miss Lee to-day?" Dr. Topliff asked of his wife that evening.

"The next time," she answered sullenly, "you

want anybody to try that sort of a job, you will get some one else or go yourself."

"Whew! Since when have you become so unruly?"

"It ought to be enough that I am the bearer of all the gossip and tattle I hear, without trying to pry into the virtue of any woman you may chance to suspect."

"I take it that you did not meet with a very warm reception."

"I met with a decidedly cool reception and a red hot ejection."

"She didn't take kindly to your suggestions then?"

"Kindly! I don't propose to make another visit to a wild-cat for you or for anybody else!"

Soon after Mrs. Topliff's visit to Edna's home, two men might have been seen almost any night prowling about the place on the Sixth Street side. On two different nights when Edna was known to be away, one of these men stood on the corner opposite, while the other mounted to the little porch and spent some time at Edna's door as if trying to fit a key to the lock. On the second night he cautiously opened the door and entered the room. After a few moments he emerged, closed the door, locked it, crossed the street and joined the man who had been keeping watch.

"It's all right," said he. "It fits to a dot. I looked 'round a little to git the lay of the land."

"You are a bold devil, Mike, and are always sticking your head where it has no business. Never go farther than you are told."

"You're too durned skeery, Ned."

"The fact is, that I don't like this business a little

bit and don't propose to go any further into it than I have to. When I am told to fit a key to a door I am not going to prowl around inside."

"Ned Franklin ain't Mike Karns."

"And I am devilish glad of it! But we mustn't be seen here together. We will separate to meet at Hank's place. You walk slowly and manage to get there some time after I do."

The man addressed as Ned, walked briskly along Sixth Street for several squares. Turning into the main business street of the city, he passed along that thoroughfare until he came to a saloon situated at the corner of a very narrow street. The building was a dilapidated affair and but dimly lighted. A free lunch sign stood at the side of the door. Ned paused a moment in front of the saloon and then entered. He called for a schooner of beer, took two small pieces of rye bread, placed a slice of Bologna sausage between them, went to a small table in an obscure corner of the room and began to eat the sandwich and wash it down with his beer.

In a few moments his accomplice entered. Looking around he spied, as if by accident, Ned Franklin.

"Hello! Ned. You here?"

With this he too ordered his beer and was soon seated at the table with Ned. Gradually their conversation lowered until it could not be overheard.

"Did he give you the money to pay for it, Ned?"

"Of course he did. How else could I get it?"

"Gosh! couldn't we hev a blow out though?"

"But we won't."

"No, it wouldn't pay. We're playin' fer a bigger stake."

"We'll have to stow the bottles away in our pockets. It wouldn't do to be seen with them in a basket."

"D'ye think they'll let you hev the other stuff?"

"They'll let me have anything I can pay for. Old Squills would sell his glass eye if he could get a cent more for it than another would cost."

By this time the lunch had been swallowed and Mike left after telling Ned good-night so loudly as to make sure that he was both heard, and seen to depart. After Ned Franklin had chatted a few minutes with the barkeeper he too went out and joined Mike who was waiting for him in the narrow street. It was little more than a dark, dingy alley with a row of dilapidated wooden buildings on either side which were occupied mainly by saloons, small shops, cheap restaurants and lunch counters. The upper stories were used for cheap lodgings and as rendezvous for the lowest classes of both sexes.

The two men made their way to a narrow building, the ground floor of which was scarcely more than a hole in the wall. A red and blue light struggled through the dirt-covered window glass. Within, there was almost as much confusion as in a Chinese junk shop. Bottles, packages, boxes, etc., mingled in veritable chaos. It was all order, however, in the noddle of the little old stoop-shouldered man with unkempt whiskers and one glass eye. It was here that liquors, opiates and other drugs were dispensed for cash to the denizens of this disreputable quarter. The

proprietor read the scrap of paper that Ned handed him, and then keenly eyed the two men with his one good eye.

"I don't sell that to everybody," said the old chemist.

"I don't want you to sell it to everybody—I want you to sell it to me," replied Ned.

"What do you want with it?"

"That's my business."

"And it's my business——"

"To sell it when you get a chance. Here is another order that I want you to fill at the same time."

"O," said the druggist, as he read the second scrap, "I see. You want to get somebody drunk and then put him to sleep, eh?"

"What the devil is that to you? Fill these orders and be quick about it," replied Ned, at the same time flourishing a bank note before the old man. It was enough. With one quick glance at the money, he shuffled off to the rear of the room and disappeared behind a screen from which, through a small opening, frequently glanced a keen black eye.

An hour later, Ned Franklin and Mike Karns were sound asleep in a rickety old story-and-a-half house, on an alley about four blocks from the home of Edna Lee. In one corner of the room was a neat, new basket containing a half dozen bottles of choice old wine.

The next afternoon the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff, and the Hon. Jacob Sharply were locked within the latter's private office.

"How are matters going, Sharply?" asked the preacher.

"Like clock work," was the lawyer's reply.

"Is there no chance of a slip?"

"O, there is always more or less uncertainty. The mine is laid, and the fuse is attached. All that remains is to get the enemy over the mine and light the fuse."

"How will you get him there?"

"That will be easy enough. He goes often of his own accord; but the thing is to get him there at the right time. I think I have all that pretty well planned."

"You don't think there is any danger of our being suspected, do you?"

"What's the difference? To be suspected is one thing, to be found out is another."

"O, I wouldn't have any one think that I——"

"Nobody will think it if you play your part. All you have to do is to stay in the background and be very sorry. But you must not overdo even that."

"How have you managed with the Chief of Police?"

"That has been the most difficult task. I first put him under a pledge of secrecy and then told him of my suspicions. He seemed very much surprised that I should ask the police to keep an eye on my own preacher. But when I explained that if Armby is a wolf in sheep's clothing he deserves all the more to be exposed, he appeared to be satisfied. I have no fear of him. He owes too much to me."

"Have you fully arranged matters with him?"

"He simply says, 'furnish the evidence and I will act.'"

"Well, I hope there will be no failure. Do you

think any of the men you have employed are liable to turn traitor?"

"What would they gain by that? They are in it for the money. After the work is done, they will keep mum to save their own skins. But to make doubly sure, I have arranged to get rid of the whole outfit."

"I think that is a wise move."

"I am glad you think so; for it will cost a lot more money than I first thought."

"More than a thousand dollars?"

"A good deal more. You see, I decided to ship two of them off east. I would send all of them; but Ned Franklin, for some reason, will not go, and Mike Karns will not agree to take his greasy old squaw."

"But why be at the expense of sending them off east?"

"Because they will gravitate to the large cities, get themselves into trouble and be put behind the bars. Then nobody will believe what they say. As for Ned Franklin, I have planned a decent burial for him, while Mike is completely under my thumb. He knows that I can clap him behind the iron grates any day."

"This blamed business is costing a lot more money than——"

"What has come over your enthusiasm, Topliff? If I remember correctly, when I first told you what I proposed to do and what it would cost, you were so elated that you offered to give me your check for the whole amount."

"But——"

"But nothing! Do you want to see the thing

through or not? If you don't I will call my men off and pay them what I have agreed. Even then, they must be shipped away, and the expense will be just as great. Besides, you will still have your friend Armby on your hands."

"Sharply, you know that——"

"Yes, I know that I am getting tired of this everlasting plea of poverty and whine about expenses. It may be just as well to let the matter drop. But I shall expect you to come down with your share of the stuff just the same."

"Now Sharply, that kind of talk is all unnecessary. Since we have gone into this affair, we must see it through and I will do my part—only keep the expense down as much as possible."

"I don't propose to go another step. I take it that if we were not already into it, you would stay out. I don't think you have fully counted the cost anyway. I don't mean in money, though that seems to trouble you more than anything else. I warn you that the explosion will be no ordinary one. It will rock this old town to its foundation and damage the church more in a day than you could repair in a hundred years."

Topliff was silent a few moments, during which the lawyer eyed him closely.

"Sharply," he at length said, "isn't there some other way by which this can be done?"

"I don't intend to try it any other way. When I proposed this plan, you eagerly approved it. I don't intend to pull this load and drag you along into the bargain. Either you will do your share and quit

grumbling, or I wash my hands of the whole business."

Topliff walked up and down the room for some moments, while Sharply sat in silence, knowing well the sort of man with whom he had to deal. At length he stopped in front of the lawyer and said with deliberation and decision,

"Sharply, you are mistaken in one thing. I have fully counted the cost. Go ahead, let the cost be what it will."

"In that case, to-night is the time to strike."

The night was dark. The sky was overcast with thick and heavy clouds which threatened to fall in a torrent of rain or a storm of snow. While it was late spring, the night was rendered damp and chill by a snow-storm such as often rage at that season of the year among the mountains and sometimes sweep down over the city and valley, spreading upon the green grass and the flowers a covering of snow.

At about ten o'clock, a dark bay horse attached to a single covered buggy was driven up to the front of the house in which Albert Armby occupied a suite of rooms. The minister's study was on the second floor where he was at that moment deeply absorbed in the preparation of his sermon for the following Sabbath. The driver of the horse wore an ample greatcoat, the collar of which was turned up about his neck and chin so as completely to conceal his face from observation. He sat back within the curtains of the buggy and awaited the approach of a young man whom he saw coming down the street.

"Say, pardner," said a voice from the shadows be-

hind the curtains, "will yer be so kind as ter take this 'ere note to the parson? I'd go myself but my 'orse won't stand hitched."

"Certainly!" said the young man; and taking the note he entered without the formality of ringing, mounted the stairs two steps at a time and rapped at Mr. Armby's study door.

"Come in! Hello, Frank! Glad to see you! Have a chair."

This was said with a cheery cordiality and with a warm clasp of the hand which showed that the young man was indeed a welcome caller.

"No, Mr. Armby—I was passing by and a man who is waiting below in a buggy asked me to bring you this note. Good-night!"

Albert was so intent in reading the note that if he heard the salutation of the young man upon leaving, he did not reply.

"Tell him I will——"

But Frank Chapin had already reached the gate and started, whistling, down the street. Armby folded the note, slipped it into his vest pocket and hurriedly drew on his outer coat which he buttoned while descending the stairs. He took his place beside the driver who drove with all speed down Maple Street in the direction of Edna's home.

The city of X—— would not have been more startled or thrown into greater consternation, if it had awakened to find that during the night an active volcano had burst from one of the mountains near by. A social eruption had broken upon the community which shook it to its very centre. The people could

scarcely credit their ears as the newsboys went about crying,

"Morning papers—all about the arrest of Dr. Armby!"

Men on their way to business heard the cry, stopped, bought the papers, read, rubbed their eyes to make sure that they were really awake and reading aright, and then read again. The papers were distributed through the residence portions and to many of Mr. Armby's own people. They took up their papers as was their wont and were amazed at what they saw:

"A Minister in Disgrace!

THE REV. ALBERT ARMBY
Arrested in the Bedroom of One of His Lady Parishioners!

MISS EDNA LEE
The Woman in the Case!

Most Sensational Accusations!"

Such were the glaring headlines on the first page of all the leading papers, followed by a detailed account of the sensational event. The papers were almost wholly given up to it. Their general tone and temper were pretty fairly expressed by the following editorial in the *Morning Times:*

"The community will be greatly shocked to learn

of the arrest of the popular young clergyman, the Rev. Albert Armby under circumstances which look very badly indeed for the accused. For some time, there has been an undertone of gossip about Mr. Armby and the pretty and somewhat romantic modiste, Miss Edna Lee. The Chief of Police was requested to look into the matter, but refused to do so unless furnished with evidence that would warrant him in making the arrest. At length, however, a warrant was sworn out and instructions were given to detectives Slouth and Scraggles to make the arrest, but first to assure themselves that there were sufficient grounds for the accusation.

"The minister and his friends assert that the whole thing is the result of a conspiracy, and ask that the community withhold its judgment until all the facts in the case can be brought to light. The *Times* has no desire to prejudice the case against the minister who is recognized as one of the most scholarly, intellectual and eloquent ministers in the west—one who has hitherto borne an untarnished reputation. From any standpoint, the affair is most deplorable, and promises to prove one of the most sensational scandals the city of X—— has ever known."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRIAL

MANY would not believe what they read. "There must be some hideous mistake," they thought. When at last the people could no longer doubt, they were filled with sorrow and indignation. If Armby had been found in some dark alley with a bullet through his heart or his skull crushed with a bludgeon, his friends would have been shocked and profoundly grieved; but their bereavement would have been mitigated by many pleasant memories, while they would have been consoled by the thought that their beloved pastor and friend had died respected and honored by all who knew him. Then they would have mourned the violence inflicted upon his body—now they were filled with indignant grief that some assassin had aimed a blow at his good name.

If the people of X—— were thus overwhelmed with grief and indignation, what must have been the feelings of the solitary figure sitting with bowed head and ashen features in the stillness of his prison cell! Soon, however, his people swarmed about him and assured him of their unshaken confidence and respect. He noted, however, that some—not many—to whom his thoughts went out in the first hours of his trouble and upon whose sympathy and help he fully relied, came

not near nor offered any word of encouragement. On the other hand, good friends arose where he least expected them. People whom he had but casually known or who had hitherto maintained a reserve which had seemed to him distant and almost cold, now came forward and proved through all the ordeal upon which he had entered, that "a friend loveth at all times!"

The offense of which Armby stood accused was punishable under the laws of the state with fine or imprisonment or both at the discretion of the court. It was not, however, the penalty of the law against which the accused minister felt himself compelled to fight. To have been heavily fined or to have been deprived of liberty itself would have been to him of comparatively small moment, if he could have but retained his good name. To have met with a violent death while in the enjoyment of the confidence and affection of his people, even at the hands of an assassin; to have been tortured to death on the rack or burned at the stake, would have been a blissful experience compared with the mental agony and the anguish of spirit suffered by this young man. It was not for his liberty that he was to battle, but for his fair reputation which he valued more than liberty or even life itself.

Judge Truman, one of the ablest and most highly respected lawyers of X——, was employed to conduct the defense of the accused minister. The hour set for the preliminary trial came. The large court-room was filled to overflowing, while hundreds of people stood without, unable to gain admission. Scores of Armby's

friends, among whom were many well-known and eminently respectable women, were present fully expecting to see their minister triumphantly vindicated.

The prosecuting attorney, who might have better been called the persecuting attorney, stated to the court what he expected to prove. The story of the extremely suspicious circumstances under which the preacher was arrested lost nothing in the telling. When he had finished, he asked the court to call Mike Karns, Abe Wood and Ned Franklin. As these men made their appearance, there was a murmur of disapproval audible among the people, a murmur meaning, "and is it by such men that they expect to make out their case?" The testimony of these men was general in its character, but prepared the way for the testimony of more important witnesses. They swore to having seen Mr. Armby repeatedly enter the house on the corner of Maple and Sixth Streets and emerge therefrom, usually after dark and sometimes late at night, and to having seen him and Miss Lee out buggy-riding together at night. Abe Wood swore that on the previous night, he saw Mr. Armby unlock the side door of Miss Lee's house and enter, taking with him a basket.

The Chief of Police was then called. He said that for some time complaints had been made to him that Mr. Armby was visiting the Lee establishment for immoral purposes; that the house at the corner of Maple and Sixth Streets needed to be watched and that if he would put his detectives on the case, he would soon find it necessary to interfere.

"I detailed two of our most discreet and reliable

men to look into the matter," went on the Chief. "They reported that Mr. Armby was seen to go and come, nearly always at night, but no other man was seen to frequent the place. What Mr. Armby's purpose was in visiting Miss Lee's place, I had no means of finding out. As the place bore no evidence of being a disreputable house, I called my men off. Yesterday I was informed that if I would send some of the police force to a certain place, they would be put in the way of evidence that could not be ignored. Accordingly, I detailed officers Slouth and Scraggles with instructions to probe the matter to the bottom and satisfy themselves whether there was anything in it or not."

"That is all," said the prosecuting attorney.

"You say," said Judge Truman, in cross-examination, "that complaint was made to you against Mr. Armby and also against Miss Lee's place. Who made this complaint?"

"I must decline to answer the question," said the Chief.

"I ask the court to compel the witness to answer," said Judge Truman.

"For what reason," asked the magistrate, "does the witness refuse to answer?"

"For the reason," replied the Chief, "that to answer would be a violation of my pledge of secrecy. Many good citizens bring to me information of violations of law, by which information I am often enabled to put a stop to lawlessness. If it should go out that the names of my informants would be made public, a valuable source of information to the office would cease."

"I think the Chief's reason is sufficient; and, as the

court does not see in what the rights of the accused are jeopardized, I am inclined to sustain the Chief of Police in his refusal to answer."

"Was your complainant one of the witnesses who have just testified?" asked Judge Truman.

"No, sir," replied the Chief.

"Do you consider the party making the complaint a trustworthy and disinterested person?"

"Eminently so," replied the witness.

"I have no further question to ask at present."

"I ask the court to swear officers Slouth and Scraggles," said the prosecuting attorney.

Slouth being asked what he knew about the case, said:

"Yesterday evenin' the Chief directed Sergeant Scraggles and me to go to the corner of the Kingston school lot at Sixth and Maple Streets where we would meet a man who would give us the cue to the Armby business. We had been detailed before to watch Miss Lee's place. The Chief told us to probe the matter to the bottom, and to arrest the preacher if we felt sure there was good grounds for his arrest.

"We reached the appointed place at about a quarter of eleven, and found Abe Wood waitin' for us. He went with us to the door of Miss Lee's place which opens on Sixth Street and said, 'he's in there!' We knocked at the door but nobody answered. We then tried the door and found it locked; but we broke in easy enough. The room we got into was a back bedroom curtained off from a large room in front. The light was turned down. Mr. Armby was undressed in bed. Under a table was a basket with

several bottles of wine in it. On the table was a wine set and three or four wine bottles, empty or partly empty. We spoke to Mr. Armby, but he did not answer. 'He's playin' possum,' says I to Scraggles. I took hold of him and shook him and told him he was under arrest. We pulled him out of bed and while we was helpin' him to dress, Miss Lee come in. We took Mr. Armby to the Central station and was ordered to put him in the Chief's room and keep close watch over him."

"You will state," said the prosecuting attorney, "whether Mr. Armby was intoxicated at the time of his arrest."

"He was."

"You stated that Miss Lee entered the room. What did she say and do upon entering?"

"She flew into a rage and demanded to know what we was doin' there. She ordered us out of the house and threatened to call the police. We showed her our stars and told her that we was officers and there to put Mr. Armby under arrest. She asked Armby what it all meant, but he only muttered somethin' which I didn't understand. She said that if he was taken, she would follow. We threatened to arrest her too, but she did follow us to the station. What become of her after that I don't know."

"That is all," said the prosecutor.

"You state very positively," said Judge Truman, "that Mr. Armby was intoxicated. How do you know that to be true?"

"By the usual signs," answered Slouth. "His tongue was thick; his ideas was confused; he stag-

gered about and was unable to manage himself. While we was on the way to the station, he could not walk straight and would have fallen if we hadn't held him up."

Sergeant Scraggles' testimony agreed in every particular with that of his fellow-officer. The people looked at each other in blank astonishment. It was clear that the officers had told a most damaging story.

It was pitiable to see the face of Albert Armby. He sat with his eyes fastened upon the officers while they gave with such detail and circumstance, their crushing testimony. When they had ended, there was a look of helpless amazement upon his pale but handsome face.

"That completes our testimony for the present," said the prosecuting attorney.

"Swear Mr. Armby," said Judge Truman to the court.

It was a trying ordeal to the sensitive young preacher to stand up in the presence of the people who had so implicitly trusted and sincerely admired him, to answer to the grave and revolting charge that had been made against him. From the time when he was twelve years of age, he had moved in an atmosphere of confidence and affection. Never in all these years had he been accused of a dishonorable act.

His own legal training and experience at the bar enabled him fully to understand that, on its face, an exceedingly strong case had been made out against him. He realized also that against the five witnesses to whose testimony he had just listened, he could oppose only his own word, unsupported by that of any one,

unless it should be Edna Lee, who was equally involved with himself.

He lifted his hand to heaven and, in the name of the God he served, took a solemn oath to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

"You will tell the Court," said Judge Truman, "all about yourself from the time you left your study last night until the moment of your arrest."

"About ten o'clock last night," began Armby in a clear, distinct voice, "while I was in my study, Frank Chapin brought me a note which stated that a man had met with a fatal accident and wanted to see me. I got into a buggy that was waiting for me and was driven down Maple Street to Sixth. The night being dark, I found it difficult to know just where we were going after we turned off Maple into Sixth. We had gone but a few blocks down Sixth Street, when we turned into a very narrow street or alley in which there was no light whatever. The driver at last stopped in front of what appeared to be a story-and-a-half wooden building. 'This is the place,' said he. There was a light in the upper story of the house, of which I caught glimpses as it shone through what seemed to be the window shades. I knocked at the door which was immediately opened. Everything was perfectly dark.

"'This is the minister, I suppose,' said a voice from the darkness. 'It is,' said I. 'Come this way,' said the voice. I started to follow the man who spoke, feeling my way as best I could. I had taken but a few steps when the hall was flooded with light behind me. Before I had time to turn around each of my arms was

seized by a strong man while a third knocked off my hat and drew something like a hood over my face. With every breath, I inhaled a sweetish, stifling vapor. I struggled a few seconds, when my limbs gave way and I sank to the floor. Then it seemed to me that I was sinking down, down into a deep, dark, narrow abyss.

"The next recollection I have is a confused memory of trying to dress myself with somebody's aid. It seemed to me that the place was full of people and that there was a confusion of voices all of which were strange to me, until I heard the voice of Miss Lee. I did not know where I was. I have an indistinct recollection of being led away and of being told that I was under arrest. When in the open air my mind began to clear a little and I said to the men who were leading me, 'In the name of God! what does all this mean?' I was told that they could answer no questions; but that I would have a chance to explain matters myself."

"Had you drunk any intoxicating liquors during the evening?" asked Judge Truman.

"I never drink intoxicating liquors of any kind. Something was wrong with me; but if I drank anything intoxicating, I was forced to do so when in an unconscious condition."

"Have you any recollection of going to Miss Lee's home?"

"None whatever!"

"Do you know anything about a basket and some bottles of wine that are said to have been found in Miss Lee's bedroom?"

"I do not."

"Did you have any appointment with Miss Lee last evening at her house or at any other place?"

"None at all!"

"Has there ever been any improper conduct between you and Miss Lee?"

"Such a thought has never entered my mind. I believe her to be utterly incapable of such a thing!"

In the cross-examination he was asked by the prosecuting attorney why he did not cry out when assailed in the house to which he claimed to have been decoyed.

"Because of the hood that was pulled over my face and because I was choked and smothered by the vapor I inhaled."

"Was there any light in the house? Did you see any before entering?"

"Yes, there was a light in the upper story."

"Then there were people living in the house?"

"I presume so."

"How did you come to be in Miss Lee's room?"

"I have no recollection of going there and am sure I was taken there by the people, whoever they were, who decoyed me into the strange house."

Then the prosecuting attorney handed the witness a key and asked:

"Have you ever seen this key, Mr. Armby?"

"Not that I know of."

"You have never had this key in your possession?"

"No, sir."

"You say you received a note requesting you to go

and see a man who had been injured. Have you that note with you?"

"I think so."

He began to feel first in one pocket and then another, looking all the while more and more perplexed. Many mistook his perplexity for confusion. At length he said with much disappointment in his tone and manner,

"I do not know what has become of it."

"What time did you leave your study, Mr. Armby?"

"I think it was about ten o'clock."

"And what time did you reach Miss Lee's room?"

"I have told you," replied Albert with some resentment but with quiet dignity, "that I have no recollection of being there at all."

"And you have no idea what you were there for?"

"I have not."

"That's all," said the attorney.

Frank Chapin was then called and testified to taking the note from the man in the buggy to Mr. Armby in his study.

In cross-examination the prosecuting attorney asked:

"Did you read the contents of the note?"

"Certainly not."

"Mr. Armby did not show you the note?"

"No, sir."

"Did he read it to you?"

"No, sir."

"Did he tell you what it contained?"

"No, sir; I left him while he was reading the letter."

"That is all you know about it, Mr. Chapin?"

"It is."

The defense here stated that they had no more evidence to offer.

"I ask the court," said the prosecutor, "to recall officers Slouth and Scraggles."

They did not have to be called very loudly as they were sitting in the front row of seats waiting to be recalled. The prosecuting attorney handed them the same key he had shown to Mr. Armby.

"Have you ever seen this key before?"

Each one in turn swore that he had.

"Have you had it in your possession?"

They had.

"Where did you get it?"

They found it in Mr. Armby's pocket after his arrest.

"You will state whether or not it fitted the lock of the door to Miss Lee's room."

It did.

This testimony created a profound sensation in the court-room. The public prosecutor, with a look of triumphant satisfaction on his face, said,

"That is all!"

Judge Truman brought to bear all his great ability and acumen in a strenuous effort to break the force of this testimony, but without avail. It was perfectly clear that the tide was turning hopelessly against the young minister, and Judge Truman fought desperately to stem the tide. He had come into the court-room thinking that some egregious blunder had been committed by the authorities. He confidently expected speedily to set the popular young preacher right before the community; but to his amazement he found that either his client was guilty or some deep and skilfully

laid plot had been contrived for the preacher's ruin. He could not imagine any adequate motive for such a conspiracy, especially as Mr. Armby was a favorite with nearly all classes of people in the city. Even the baser sort respected him; for he was not given to their denunciation, but had, on several occasions, shown himself the friend of sinners. At all events, Judge Truman was not a man to weaken in the face of unexpected difficulties. Accepting the theory of a conspiracy to ruin his client, he demanded of the witnesses how they happened to know so much about Mr. Armby's movements.

They had been passing by or had accidentally seen him here or there or yonder. Judge Truman began to be convinced that he had made no mistake in adopting the theory of conspiracy. He therefore sternly demanded to know if they had not been employed to watch Mr. Armby's movements.

"We object!" shouted the prosecuting attorney.

"Overruled," said the court.

They were compelled to answer that they had.

"By whom were you employed?"

The prosecutor was on his feet in an instant shouting again, "We object!"

He urged that if this man, as a wolf in sheep's clothing, had been going about deceiving the people and preying upon society, it did not concern the public or the court, who had been at the trouble and expense of subjecting the villain to merited exposure and of bringing him to justice. He succeeded in convincing the court that his position was well taken and his objection was sustained.

For some reason Judge Truman did not put Edna Lee on the witness stand, though she had sent to him a note asking to be called. The testimony was closed and the arguments were about to be taken up, when the audience was startled to hear the clear but tremulous voice of a woman. Looking to the point from which the voice came, they saw Edna Lee in one of the aisles rapidly approaching the magistrate and demanding to be heard.

"I insist upon being heard!" she exclaimed. "I know it is all false! Let me swear to that good man's innocence!"

"The young lady will sit down and be quiet or I will be under the painful necessity of ordering her removed from the room," said the magistrate.

"I will be heard! This is an infamous——"

By this time Albert was at Edna's side.

"It is impossible for you to be heard now," said he; "but you shall be at another time. You must be seated and keep quiet for the present."

Yielding to his advice, she resumed her seat and the prosecutor began his address. He reviewed the testimony which as he said, was most damaging to the accused and pointed out the significance of the failure of the defense to put Miss Lee on the witness stand. True, Armby and Miss Lee denied that there had been anything criminal between them or any prearrangement by which they were to be together on the preceding night. But they were interested parties and the motive for swearing falsely could be easily understood. As to the note brought by Frank Chapin, it was very likely from Miss Lee herself, telling him

when to come, what hour she would be at home and that he should go in a covered buggy so as to avoid recognition. He had probably been imbibing before he went.

On the other hand there could be no adequate motive for all these witnesses to swear falsely. All the corroborating testimony was against the accused. He had been out with her buggy riding, had been seen going to and coming from her place after dark, and above all, he had a key to the door of her private bed-chamber, showing beyond all question that there was a complete understanding between them. It was natural and to be expected that the best explanation possible would be made of these suspicious circumstances. As to the accused being decoyed into a strange place and overpowered, it was, in his opinion, a pure invention made out of whole cloth in order to account for the damning circumstances of being found in this woman's bedroom, in her bed, undressed as if waiting for her, having wine and other supplies on hand for a night's feasting and debauchery.

To all this Judge Truman could only oppose the hitherto unimpeachable character of the accused, and the belief that all this array of apparently damaging testimony was a web, strong and entangling it must be confessed, woven by some human spiders under the cover of secrecy, to ensnare and ruin the young minister.

The court regretted to have to discharge so unpleasant a duty as to pass upon this case, involving as it did, the good name and perhaps the future hopes of so able and accomplished a gentleman as Mr. Armby;

and he regretted this all the more because of the high esteem in which he, in common with all the people of the community, had hitherto held the accused. In holding the prisoner under bonds in the amount of one thousand dollars to await the action of the grand jury, he did so in the hope that Mr. Armby might yet be able to achieve his vindication.

Colonel Blakeslee was one of those whom Armby had not reckoned among his warm and intimate friends. True he was a member of Trinity church and of its board of trustees. He always greeted the young minister with cordiality; but he was a man of few words and not given to profuse compliments or to effusive professions of friendliness. He was a man of deeds rather than of words. He was present in the court-room and gave the closest attention to all that was done and said. When the bond was fixed at a thousand dollars, Colonel Blakeslee stepped up to the bench and said so quietly that only the magistrate heard him,

"Have the bond prepared and send it to my office."

CHAPTER XIX

THE VICTIM

WHEN Albert left the court-room he went to his study and locked the door. Then for the first time, the full effect of his downfall began to dawn upon his mind. Everything in his study was as he left it, and yet how changed! When Frank Chapin came to his door with that treacherous note, this room was his sanctum, his books were his friends, his pen his ready servant. All his work here was preparatory for his work in the pulpit—his sanctum sanctorum. In preparing his sermons, the faces of his beloved people were often before him. It was for them he was preparing his message.

Now this room was to him a chamber of tortures. His books were like so many erstwhile friends who had turned their backs upon him. His pen lay still and mute upon the table. Yesterday at this hour the best churches in the land were open to him—now the door of every church in Christendom was closed against him.

"And Evelyn Blakeslee! My God! Can I ever look her in the face again?"

He was startled by a knock at his door, but he did not open. Then came another knock, louder still.

"I wonder who it is! I will open the door and say that I want to be left alone."

He found a messenger about to depart, having a letter in his hand. It was for himself. Recognizing the familiar handwriting, he tore open the envelope with trembling hands and read:

"DEAR ALBERT:

"The time has come for me to speak. Come without delay.

"EVELYN."

This brief note was like a burst of sunlight from a blackened sky. He started in haste to obey the summons. Then he thought,

"How can I bear to meet her?"

He continued on his way, though with slackened pace. The nearer he approached the Blakeslee mansion, the more reluctant became his steps. When at last he pulled the bell-cord, he felt that he must turn and fly; but the door was instantly opened and he was met, not by a servant, but by Evelyn herself, robed in one of her most becoming gowns. She was pale and her eyes bore traces of weeping, but she greeted him with extended hands and a smiling face.

"You have done well to come," said she, "for I should have gone myself to bring you. I had already ordered the carriage."

She took his arm and led him into the parlor.

"Do you remember, Albert, the day when our eyes first met in this same room?"

"I can never forget it," he said in saddened tones.

"I have loved you, Albert, ever since that hour!"

Her head was resting on his shoulder while he held her to his heart. O, entrancing moment! How his heart had yearned for this embrace. He raised her

head, gazed for an instant into her swimming eyes, then pressed his burning lips to hers.

Suddenly he released her from his embrace.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "what have I done?"

His manner and expression were so changed that Evelyn was startled and almost frightened.

"Why Albert, what is the matter? Are you ill?"

"I am sick at heart, Evelyn, O, so sick at heart!"

She gently laid her hand upon his arm.

"Be calm, dear Albert, and do not lose heart. Let me tell you that until now I have felt that I could never become the wife of a minister. I see how foolish I was. I am ready, Albert, to cling to you through ill report as well as good. Do let my love be some comfort to you in this dark hour!"

Albert was about to clasp her to his heart again, but restrained himself.

"No!" said he, "all is lost—my good name, my place among men, my future hopes. And, dear Evelyn, your noble conduct now only makes me feel how great is my loss in losing you!"

"But you have not lost me, Albert—you have but just found me."

"Listen, Evelyn. I never loved you as I love you now, and sweeter is your love than life to me; but I can never make you an offer of marriage until I can bring to you an untarnished name."

"Let us leave that to the future, Albert. For the present let us take comfort in each other's love. I wanted to tell you that my faith in you is unshaken and that I love you with all my heart!"

"And I shall live, my dear one, to prove myself

worthy of your faith and love. Good-bye! God bless your noble, generous heart!"

"The carriage is waiting for me. I will have the driver take you wherever you wish to go. You must come to see me every day."

He returned to his study, where he found Colonel Blakeslee waiting for him.

"I have come, Mr. Armby, to take you to my house."

"I have just come from there, Colonel."

"I suppose so, but you must return with me and make your home with us."

So saying he entered the carriage and without waiting for Albert either to decline or accept, ordered the driver to take them home. Colonel Blakeslee had never been demonstrative in his friendship for Armby; but from the moment when disaster came Albert found his friendship as pure gold tried in the fire.

The effect of Albert's arrest and trial, upon his standing and position as a Christian minister, was instant and overwhelming. He at once called a meeting of the managing board of his church and informed that body that a new pastor must be secured and advised that it be done as soon as possible.

"The stricken flock," said he, "cannot too soon have a shepherd!"

In vain his board entreated him to remain at the head of the church.

"No!" he replied. "The work of the ministry is difficult enough under the most favorable conditions. Many people believe me guilty. Many others who stand by me must have some doubt of my integrity.

I do not wonder at it. With such an array of witnesses against me, how could it be otherwise? I shall never enter the pulpit again so long as this dark cloud hangs over me!"

He published the following note in the city papers:

"While conscious of my own integrity, I am aware that many who have believed in me have had their faith sadly shaken. I deplore the effect of my misfortune upon the cause I love, more than upon myself. In order to relieve the church of all further responsibility and detriment, I have resigned my place as pastor of Trinity church and severed my connection with the church itself.

"If the time ever comes when I can stand before the people whose confidence I have hitherto enjoyed, fully exonerated from the accusations that have been made against me, I shall count it my chief joy to take up again the work I now lay down.

"ALBERT ARMBY."

The strain upon Armby's mind and spirit was most distressing. His every movement was closely watched. He could scarcely turn around without having some mention made of the fact in the newspapers. Every day he was sought by reporters and asked to make some statement for publication. This he steadfastly refused.

At length, as the result of a consultation with a few of his closest advisers, he determined quietly to leave the city in the hope of finding some relief from the strain. Furthermore, it was thought that if the impression went abroad that he had gone away for good, the parties implicated in the conspiracy would be less guarded and might talk more freely. Whither he was to go was known only to the very few who had banded themselves together to ferret out the dark

mystery and bring to punishment the perpetrators of the infamy.

"It has been decided, Evelyn," said Albert on the evening after this arrangement had been made, "that I am to go to the Deep River country for a while."

"To the Deep River country!" exclaimed Evelyn. "Why so far away and to that frightful region?"

"It isn't so far. You know your father's company has some property out there. They have concluded to send me out to look after their interests."

"I have a horrible dread, dear Albert, to have you go. From what I have heard, the country itself is a wild and lawless region, while the way to it lies through mountain fastnesses and desert wastes that are exceedingly dangerous to traverse. Then, there is scarcely a week during which there is not a robbery or a murder committed on the trail by Glocksin's band."

"Your love, my darling, excites your fears. True it is that Glocksin and his band of freebooters infest some parts of the country between here and Deep River, but they only molest pack-trains on the way out with supplies or miners returning with gold. I shall have nothing to tempt them, either going or coming."

"How long will you be gone?"

"That will depend upon developments here. If the time comes when my friends think my presence is required, some one is to come for me. My stay, therefore, is uncertain."

"But, Albert, how can I endure to have you away so long?"

"You must not worry, dear Evelyn!"

"How can I hear from you? There is no mail, is there?"

"Some one will be coming in by whom I can send you a letter. Remember the old saying that no news is good news. If you do not hear from me, it will simply be owing to the fact there is no way of sending you word."

"When do you go?"

"In two or three days."

The Deep River district, while not a very great distance from X—— when measured by miles, was nevertheless, considered one of the most remote regions of that western country as it was one of the most difficult of access. Some hardy adventurers, lured by the love of gold, had penetrated to that wild region and returned with accounts of rich discoveries. Then followed an exodus to the land of promised wealth. Most of the pilgrims returned disappointed, while some remained in hopes of finding the hidden treasures. It was exceedingly unsafe for any one to attempt the trip out or back, if possessed of anything tempting to the robbers.

After a moment's silence Albert said,

"There is a matter of some delicacy, Evelyn, which I think I should mention to you."

"What is it, Albert?"

"I must see Miss Lee before I go away."

The shadow that came over Evelyn's face did not escape Albert's notice.

"Dear Evelyn," he said, taking her hand in his, "I sincerely hope you do not object."

"Dear Albert, I know you would not do anything

you did not think best, but I am so anxious that your enemies should not——"

"I understand you, dearest. No risks whatever will be taken. I felt that I ought to speak to you about it first."

"That was unnecessary—though I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"I think I ought also to tell you my purpose in seeing her."

"No, I had rather you would wait and tell me the result of your interview."

"Tell me, Evelyn, do you blame Miss Lee for this trouble?"

Evelyn hesitated and looked greatly perplexed. She was candor personified. She would no more have evaded his question than she would have told him an out-and-out lie.

"I must confess, Albert, that I cannot help feeling that she is largely responsible for it."

"Strange!" said Albert, more to himself than to Evelyn. "I know," he continued, "that nearly all the ladies feel that way. I wondered if you did. It seems so strange to me."

"Why so strange, Albert?"

"The ladies are my most enthusiastic defenders, and yet they blame her. It is so strange to me that they cannot see that if I am innocent, she must be."

"Do you know, dear Albert, that there are some people who believe that she is an adventuress and was in the plot to ruin you?"

Armby looked searchingly into Evelyn's face as he tried to read there the full meaning of her words.

"I trust, Evelyn," he said almost sternly, "that you are not one of them!"

The tears came unbidden to her eyes. Albert's heart smote him as if he had been guilty of some outrageous cruelty. He caught her in his arms, pressed her to his heart and kissed her trembling lips, while over and over again he begged her forgiveness.

"I do not blame you, dearest," she sweetly murmured. "People say so many things to me that I do not know what to think. I wondered if it could be true."

"If you knew her as I do, my little one, you would know that such a thing is impossible. However, if you say so, I will not see her at all, but will write her a letter and submit it to you before sending it."

"No! no! I want you to see her. Really, Albert —I—I—don't think she is to blame at all!"

And this was the nearest approach to a quarrel between Albert and Evelyn that ever happened and the nearest a fib that Evelyn was ever known to tell.

The meeting between Albert and Edna took place in Judge Truman's offices in the presence of Judge Truman and another witness. While there was sufficient privacy for Albert to say whatever he deemed advisable without being overheard, it was sufficiently public that there could be no just criticism of the meeting.

"I am going to leave the city for a while, Edna," began Albert, "and wanted to see you before going away."

When he spoke of going away, Edna turned deathly pale and it was with a desperate effort that she succeeded in maintaining her self-control. She had not

seen him to speak to him since their trouble had come upon them. She did not know how he felt towards her, and had wondered much whether or not he blamed her for his misfortune, She was glad that an interview had been arranged, for she longed for an opportunity to tell him of her great sorrow on account of the calamity which had befallen him.

"I am not surprised," he continued, "that your nerves should be unstrung. The strain that has been upon you must have been something dreadful."

"I have wanted so much to see you, but——"

She could trust herself to proceed no further.

"You must not give way, Edna; but keep up your courage. The outlook, I know, seems dark; but you can and will be brave, won't you?"

Poor girl! Every word while spoken in kindness—even in tenderness, and because it was so spoken, was like a dagger to her heart.

"I am sick at heart, Mr. Armby. O I am sick at heart! I don't know what to think—I don't know what to do! They blame me for it all!"

"Why should they blame you? There is one, Edna, who does not blame you."

These words were spoken with so much tenderness and sympathy, that Edna's heart was deeply touched. She bent her face into her hands and unable longer to control her feelings, gave way to violent weeping. It was the first time Armby had seen her in tears and he rightly judged that they were of the kind that bring relief to the heart and quiet to the spirit. He waited until she should be able to regain her self-control, only saying,

"Sorrow may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning!"

"Forgive this weakness, Mr. Armby," she said. "I was afraid that you too might think I was to blame. With but one exception, yours are the only kind words I have heard since that awful day. I am so glad that you do not think unkindly of me!"

"Far from it! I pity you with all my heart and only wish I could take all the weight of the blow upon myself."

"I would rather they had killed me, than to have made me the means of your misfortune. It matters little what happens to me; but you—and your work!"

"I can stand it better than you can, Edna. As to the work, God will take care of that."

"My faith is all gone, Mr. Armby. Before this dreadful thing happened, I was rapidly getting rid of my worst doubts. I believed in you and your work. You had made many things plain and simple to me which before had been difficult and dark. I had begun to believe in a personal God who loves and cares for His children and was coming to feel that Christ is a living real friend. In this dawning faith, my life was coming to have a new meaning, a new hope, a new joy. But it is all gone and I am more in the dark than ever."

"Well, Edna," replied Albert, "I confess that it is hard—even impossible to see through this dreadful night and reconcile what has happened with the love and providence of God. I will not try to meet your difficulties with arguments, for to be entirely frank with you, I have none. So far as mere intellectual

faith is concerned, mine, as well as yours, is gone; but there is such a thing as a faith of the heart, and mine tells me that the time will come when the night, dark and dreadful as it is, will be followed by a brighter day than either of us has ever seen, and that it will be made all the more beautiful because of the darkness through which we are passing."

As he uttered these words, he was looking out of the window as if seeing something afar off, while his handsome features were lighted up as if the day he had described was already dawning upon him. Edna, catching some of his faith and enthusiasm, exclaimed,

"Forgive me! Mr. Armby, I think it is as natural for you to believe as it is for me to doubt. If you were to be here, or if I had the help of some one of strong faith and sympathy when you are gone, I believe I might yet regain the ground I have lost. But after you go away, there will be no one to whom I can go, and I am afraid I shall drift into downright despair."

"It was on that point more than any other that I wanted to speak with you. You have not yet fully realized the ordeal through which you are to pass. You have but tasted of the bitter cup you are yet to drink to its very dregs. I know too much of human nature at its best, to be left in doubt of what the attitude of the community towards you will be. The very people who should cling the most closely to you will be the first to desert you—I refer to the members of your own sex."

"They have already done so, Mr. Armby," said Edna somewhat bitterly. "I have gone to the church

services, to the weekly prayer-meeting as I had been doing; but many of the ladies seemed unconscious of my presence, while those who did speak to me or give me their hand, did so like one who swallows a bitter medicine as quickly as possible so as to be done with it."

"Did they all treat you that way?" asked Armby with a touch of indignation in his voice.

"All except one."

"Who was she?" asked Armby quickly.

"Do you remember seeing a little old woman dressed in black and muffled up so that you could scarcely see her face?"

There was a tone of disappointment in Albert's words as he replied,

"Yes, I think I remember having seen her."

"It was she. After the prayer service last night, she came to me when I was about to leave the room, and took me by the hand. Hers was cold and she was all in a tremble while her blue eyes seemed fairly to glow. She gazed into my face but for a moment and then said hurriedly, 'My daughter, do not despair, neither permit bitterness to, dwell in thy heart. Remember that He who said: I will never leave thee nor forsake thee, also said vengeance is Mine, I will repay.' With this she hurried out of the room as if afraid to trust herself to say more. There was something in the grasp of her hand, in the tone of her voice and in her manner that thrilled me to the very heart and made me feel that I had at least one friend among the women of the city. Her voice and manner impressed me deeply. It seems as if somewhere, sometime I have seen her before."

"I don't understand it, Edna. The ladies are among my best friends. They fairly swarm about me with words of confidence and esteem; and yet they turn from you and leave you to find encouragement elsewhere or to become hopelessly discouraged."

"Out of that fact, Mr. Armby, grew one of my bitterest disappointments. During the hour of prayer, every one had a supplication for you. At times, those who prayed were well-nigh choked with their emotions, while sobs could be heard all over the house. To every prayer I said amen! O, how my heart went out towards those people! I felt that I must share in their sympathies and prayers, though of course no mention was made of me; but when the meeting was over and they treated me so coldly, I felt crushed and humiliated beyond expression. I cannot endure to go back there again."

"Poor girl!" he said as if speaking to himself; then turning to her he added, "there is a friend, Edna, that sticketh closer than a brother!" He handed her a little morocco bound copy of the New Testament saying, "In this you will find what He has already said to you. I have gone through it carefully and marked the passages which I thought might help you most. And now I want your sacred promise that you will make this little book your monitor and guide, that you will seek to realize the love and compassion of our Great Friend and that you will maintain your integrity even should it be at the cost of your life!"

"O! my dear friend, my brother, I will, to the limit of my poor strength, do all you ask, both because I ought and because you ask it!"

"I have not spoken of the trials through which you will have to pass for the purpose of discouraging you; but that you might be forewarned of them and therefore the better prepared to meet them. I shall not cease to be interested in you and if the day ever comes when I can afford you any service, I shall esteem it a great privilege to render it."

"If by giving up this poor life of mine I could remove the cloud from yours and place you where you were before all this happened, it should be as freely given as you have put into my hand this book which I shall prize so much. You have exacted a pledge from me which I did not hesitate to give. In return I want you to promise that wherever you may be, you will, when possible, keep me informed of your whereabouts; for I shall devote my whole life to clearing up this mystery, and if I ever get hold of its solution, I will find you, should I have to penetrate to the jungles of India or Africa to do so!"

"I promise you, Edna, with the understanding that you will not mention my whereabouts to any one else. You will not be the only one who will be quietly at work to ferret out the perpetrators of this infamy. Some clues we have already. They will be followed up, and the conspirators unmasked if it can possibly be done. And now good-bye; and may God be with you and bless you!"

Edna, by a strong effort repressed the tears which started to her eyes, gave him her hand, bade him good-bye and went out into the world which has won the reputation of being a cold world and which is not so cold towards any one else as it is towards a

woman who is supposed to have parted with her honor.

The disaster had come upon him like an appalling thunderclap; it was to creep over her like a stealthy, stifling, poisonous night. To him it was as a disease whose blighting stroke is sudden and overwhelming; to her it was as a malady whose progress is slow, wasting, inexorable, fatal.

CHAPTER XX

THE SUFFERER

EDNA LEE was soon to have new and ever increasing proof of the truth of Albert Armby's prophecy of her coming trials. A large number of her patrons had already left her. Many of the ladies, among whom were some of the most prominent in Trinity church, did not even allow her to complete the work she had already commenced for them. Others allowed her to complete the work they had given her, but took her no more. Some of her girls refused to work for her, while she was compelled to dismiss others because she no longer had work for them to do. In less than a month she was obliged to close her home and abandon the business in which she had been so prosperous.

In the time of her prosperity she had saved some money and had a balance at bank; not large to be sure, but such that she was in no danger of immediate destitution. She felt that she must make her savings go as far as they would, as she did not know how she was to obtain more. She hoped that public opinion would react in her favor, or at least relax its cruel strength against her. Alas! she had yet to learn that public sentiment against a woman in her situation is more relentless than death. It may strangle but does

not kill. It may drive her upon the streets in rags and send her from door to door begging bread; it may turn her heart to stone and freeze the tear of sorrow upon her cheek; it may drive her to sell her body for bread, having already parted with everything else any one will buy—to the commission of any crime that promises relief from her hunger, to prison and to death; but it never relaxes its gripe upon her throat.

Slowly but surely Edna's little savings dwindled away. In an isolated quarter of the city, she rented a cottage with only two rooms, but soon closed one of them to reduce expenses and sold its furnishings in order to replenish her scanty purse. She advertised to do sewing by the piece or by the day, giving her name in the advertisement. No responses came. Then she thought that if she advertised anonymously, she might be more successful. Answers came, but when she appeared for work she was either turned coldly away or put off under some lying pretense or another.

At last all her money was gone. One thing after another was sold to the pawnbroker at ruinous sacrifices—her watch, her rings, whatever she had of silverware, until nothing remained that a pawnbroker would buy. Then dealers in second-hand goods were visited, who came to her room and departed, now with a bundle of her clothes, and again with a package of her bedding she could illy spare; for winter was at hand, the nights were cold and she could not afford to keep a fire. Then the carpet was taken off the floor and her room stripped of every piece of furniture she could possibly do without. Her clothing became

threadbare and she reduced her diet to a point where a bird could scarcely subsist.

An occasional ray of light relieved this dark day in the life of Edna Lee. Usually it broke through the sombre clouds in an unexpected quarter of the sky.

How she should manage to take care of her horse was to her a serious problem. About dusk, one evening, she went to pay the weekly amount for his keep. The proprietor of the stables was a blunt man, but by no means an ignorant one. Her changed condition could not escape his observation. He noticed that the ruddy glow of health had faded from her cheeks; that her lips, usually so rich with color, had become almost livid; and that her habitual buoyancy had given place to pitiful melancholy. He noted too that her clothing was worn and that the money she offered him was in small change, which doubtless she had been saving up at the expense of her own comfort.

"Miss Lee," said the proprietor, "I am not going to take a cent of your money. I can see that you are going hungry to save money to pay me."

"O, I can earn more," replied Edna with a dismal attempt to be cheerful. "I will have enough by——"

"Wait till you get it. You don't know when you will have more. I can see very well how things are. You——"

"I beg of you, sir, to write me a receipt, that I may go."

"Very well," said he as he made out a receipt covering a month's pay.

"Why, sir, I have not paid you this amount, and

cannot just now. If you will let me, I much prefer to pay by the week."

"Now see here, Miss Lee, don't be foolish. I have told you that I don't intend to charge you anything for keeping your horse. You are welcome to do with him as you please. I shall have no claim upon him."

"But, sir——"

"But nothing! You are in hard luck just now. I tell you there is some damned villainy—excuse my French—at the bottom of your trouble. Mark my word for it, the cat will out some of these days. I am no church man and don't take much stock in preachers; and I have kept my eye on that man Armby——"

Edna's face was crimson in an instant, while lightning from her flashing eyes was playing all about the speaker as he sat on his high office chair at his desk.

"How dare you speak of him in that way? He is one of the truest men——"

"Just wait a moment! Don't try to defend anybody before he is attacked. Wait till I finish what I was going to say. I think Mr. Armby is a grand man, and that somebody is trying to down him. The blow was aimed at him but struck you the hardest. He is the victim, but you are the sufferer."

"I sincerely beg your pardon, sir, I thought——"

"Never mind—I know what you thought. Rest perfectly easy about your horse. He shall have the best of care. If ever you are able to pay me, all right; if not, don't worry about it."

After thanking the man for his kindness, Edna went

away with a great lump in her throat and a tear in her eye.

As Edna's body wasted under the pressure of cold, hunger and anxiety, her heart became more and more like a stone. She had not forgotten her interview with Armby nor the pledge she had made him. Every day, morning and night, she read the little book he had given her, especially the passages he had marked. One was the inimitably beautiful and touching assurance which Christ gave of the love and care of the heavenly Father. "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?"—"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not neither do they spin, and I say unto you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.—Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field which to-day is and to-morrow is cast into the oven, shall He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" She tried earnestly to accept these assurances, and so long as there seemed any hope, they gave her much comfort. But as her situation became daily more desperate, her faith began to fail until at last as she read the little book, even the passages that Albert had marked, became a mockery and seemed to tantalize her with their empty promises.

Her nights of fitful slumber were often broken by dreams of walking barefoot in the snow, of wading cold streams, of being lost in a snow-storm, of being out of bed with only her night-clothes on trying to make a fire and of the sticks turning to icicles in her

hands. Awakening from time to time, she would find that it was all a dream, but that it was no dream that she was shivering with cold for the reason that the covering was light and there was no fire in the room. Then she would draw her skirts and other clothing over her and fall asleep again only to be reawakened by still other wintry dreams.

After one such night she arose unrefreshed from her comfortless bed, and after having prepared and eaten her frugal meal, took her broom and began to sweep. As she swept near the door, she heard the sound of a metallic substance which she had brushed across the floor. Upon picking it up, she found it to be a silver coin. While she was wondering how it could have come there, the words flashed upon her mind "are ye not much better than they?—Shall He not much more clothe you?" Then she said aloud,

"How foolish I was to doubt! Well was it said 'O ye of little faith!'"

At this moment her eyes fell upon a scrap of paper lying near where she had picked up the coin. She caught it up eagerly and read,

"This is yours. Do not fear to use it. Make no effort to find out where it came from."

She stood for a moment in silent thought. Then she said,

"After all it may be God's doings. If He touched somebody's heart and prompted it to help me in my need, it is as really His work as if He had made the coin Himself and put it under my door."

Then she began to wonder who the human agency could be, through whom God had come to her rescue.

This wonder was intensified as every morning she found a silver piece of the same denomination. Her curiosity was greatly excited to learn through whom she thus received her daily bread.

"I will watch," she said. Then the words, "Make no effort to find out where it comes from," occurred to her.

"No!" she thought. "If God prompted the person to bring the coin, He also prompted the note. I will not try to find out—I will wait."

Pride in a genuinely proud woman is the last thing to give way. Many times Edna's pride had been severely hurt, in her struggles, but it had not yet received its death wound. That the evidences of poverty apparent in her dress might not attract attention, she formed the habit of going out after dark to make the little purchases her needs required. As she approached her lonely dwelling, one evening, she saw a man come out at her gate and glide rapidly down the street in the opposite direction. Notwithstanding his haste and the darkness, she could not fail to recognize, as he passed a street lamp, the bulky form, the long coat and especially the long hair of the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff. She quickened her step, entered her room and fastened the door behind her. Upon turning up the light which she had left burning low, and glancing apprehensively towards the door, she saw the shining silver coin—this time with a piece of folded paper near it. A terribly unwelcome thought flashed upon her mind. Taking up the coin and the slip of paper, she found her fears but too well confirmed.

"There is but one person in the world who is both able and willing to help you. You know who that person is and upon what terms you can command his assistance."

She flung the coin into the till of her open trunk as if it had burnt her hand, threw the paper on the floor and stamped upon it as if stamping out the life of a serpent that had crawled into her room. Then she stood for a moment panting with rage, picked up the paper, crushed it in her clenched hand while a blaze of indignant wrath flashed from her eyes.

"The villain!" she at last exclaimed through her white and tremulous lips. "To think that I have been living upon his charity and was fool enough to imagine it was from God! I will starve, I will freeze to death, I will perish by my own hand before I will live upon his contributions!"

From that moment she did not touch another coin, except to pick it up, as each night one was slipped under her door, and throw it into the trunk in a manner which but too plainly showed her loathing. It occurred to her to watch, some evening, until the coin should appear and then suddenly fling open the door and confront the object of her hatred with scorn and denunciation; but upon reflection, she knew that she would but expose herself to further trouble and danger.

"I will bide my time," she said. "Vengeance shall be mine!"

Then she thought of the little old woman and her words: "Remember Him who said, 'vengeance is Mine, I will repay!'"

From day to day, Edna's situation grew worse until it reached a point where it really became desperate. She had tried every way to get work as a seamstress. Then she sought employment as a housekeeper—a domestic. She went to various employment agencies in response to their advertisements. She was invariably assured that there was no doubt about their being able to place her in a few days. Their terms were a registration fee of a dollar and a percentage of the first month's salary. At first she paid her dollar, gave her address and then waited for the promised notification which never came. When she no longer had even a dollar to give, she begged these petty thieves who prey upon their poor and unsuspecting victims, to find her any employment by which she could earn an honest living—assuring them that she would pay them liberally out of her earnings. They made her promises which they had no intention of fulfilling, and raised her hopes only to disappoint them anew.

Meantime her health began to give way, and it became apparent even to herself that the struggle must soon end. After another day's disappointment, she was returning to her wretched room. Her thoughts ran on before, came back and reported, "there is only a crust of bread left, a small slice of bacon, one egg, no butter, no tea, no coffee—scarcely enough all told to make even one frugal meal. The day is damp and chilly, the room is cold and bare, while there is scarcely coal enough to make one good fire. To-morrow morning there will be nothing left—no food, no fuel, no money—not even a penny!"

By this time she had reached her door and entered,

It was getting late. The room was dark. She lighted her lamp and was about to start a fire, when she heard a slight noise at the door and turning, saw the daily coin and beside it a folded paper. She sprang forward, turned the key and flung open the door only in time to see a figure disappearing in the darkness. Her impulse was to run after it and wreak vengeance upon it; but she restrained herself by the thought that the fleet figure was already beyond her reach, and that, if she could overtake it, she was powerless to inflict any punishment. She went back into her room, picked up the piece of silver, and held it in her hand while she read this brief note: "Expect a visitor to-morrow night." She was for a moment beside herself with anger and indignation. A sudden thought then occurred to her.

"Why should I not avail myself of this help? I have money enough in that trunk to relieve all my pressing needs, and offer of more on condition—— Never! Yet why not? I could not be more thoroughly despised, more completely degraded in the eyes of the world, if I were guilty and everybody knew it. If there is a God, He has long since turned His back upon me. I have found the promises of that book to be as hollow and empty as the pretensions of this villain who claims to be God's servant and even His representative and messenger. It is all a mockery and a delusion. But my sacred promise! O, Armby! Armby! if I but had your counsel and help in this dark hour!"

She flung the coin into the trunk, and making up a small fire, prepared and ate her meager supper—her

mind evidently far removed from what she was doing.

"So I am to have a visitor to-morrow night! Little good it will do him! I am glad Armby put that pledge in those words. I shall maintain my integrity, and it will, in all probability, cost me my life. It may cost somebody's life besides mine!"

She took from beneath her pillow a small, silver-plated pearl handled pistol. After having tried its mechanism to make sure it was in good working condition, she carefully reloaded it. From the way she handled the weapon, it was evident that she was no novice in the use of this dangerous little toy. Many a time when out on her long rides, she had practiced with the pistol until, small as it was, it was a most formidable weapon in the trained hand of this slender little woman.

"Even if it costs me my life!" she said. "But I have not quite reached the last extremity. I must make one more effort. To-morrow shall tell the story."

So saying, she took from her closet a dress on which she worked until the town clock struck one. She held it up, looked at it, tried it on.

"I guess that will do," she finally said.

She then dressed herself for bed, blew out the light and was soon fast asleep awaiting the ordeal of the coming day.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST EXTREMITY

THE next morning Edna, clad in the dress on which she had worked half of the preceding night, started out to make her one last effort. It was a dark, chilly morning. The clouds hung heavily and gloomily in the air, as if ready to fall in torrents of rain, or burst into a storm of sleet or snow.

"I have tried my own sex," thought Edna, "until I know that I have nothing to expect from them. I will see if man is any more merciful."

She spent the forenoon in visiting the principal stores, in the hope that she might find employment as a clerk. One after another said to her, "We have no vacancies at present." In some stores, she saw on the manager's door cards on which was lettered: "No help wanted to-day." In a few instances the proprietors asked her some questions which indicated that they were thinking favorably of her application. Among other things they asked her name and address. When she said, "My name is Edna Lee," they looked at her closely, seemed to recall something they had nearly forgotten, and then put her off with some vague excuse,—usually saying that they would take her address, and that if an opening should occur for which she was suited, they would drop her a line. In one

case she was asked what experience she had had in such work. She was compelled to say, "None. But, sir," she added, "I believe I could quickly learn; and until I do, I am willing to accept whatever wages you think I earn, however little. I only ask an opportunity to prove whether I can be useful to you or not."

There was so much that was eager, sorrowful and heart-searching in Edna's tone, that the proprietor seemed touched with pity. When, as it seemed to her, he was about to decide in her favor, a woman wrapped in furs and otherwise well and comfortably dressed, who had stood near for a moment and heard a part of the conversation, plucked the merchant by the sleeve and motioned him aside. This woman held a brief conversation with him, at the conclusion of which he returned to Edna and said,

"I am sorry that we are not in a position just now to give you work."

In the woman who was then leaving the store, Edna recognized one of her old customers who at that moment owed her money for work.

"I understand," said Edna, and then she left the store.

Noon came. The clouds had begun to carry out their threats by sending down a drizzling rain so cold that it might have been a vast spray from a mammoth cavern of ice. Edna rightly judged that she could accomplish nothing during the noon hour. Being weary and disheartened from the disappointments of the forenoon, she took refuge from the rain in the hallway of one of the large office buildings. Seated upon the stone steps of the stairway, she sought to rest her-

self before renewing her toilsome task. She felt no hunger, though she was faint from the want of food and on account of her exertions and anxiety. However hungry she might have been, her larder as well as her purse was empty.

"I will see," she said, "if I cannot find some office work, copying, or something of the kind to do."

At one o'clock, with little hope of success, she began once more her search for employment. She went from office to office, as during the forenoon she had gone from store to store. It was the same old heartbreaking experience. Many said they were sorry they had nothing for her to do; others that they had all the help they needed. Some who knew her personally frankly said,

"Miss Lee, I would not dare to employ you in my office. This is not meant as a reflection upon you. Whatever my own private opinion may be, I have a wife and daughters who may feel differently from what I do, and I cannot afford to have any controversy with them over a matter of this kind."

Still others expressed sympathy for her, whether they felt it or not. Some evidenced their sincerity by offering her money either as a gift or a loan. These offers were invariably declined with grateful acknowledgments. In one or two instances she was offered employment, but with an adroit suggestion of the terms of dishonor upon which she would be expected to accept it. The only reply made to such an offer was a face white with rage and a withering look of scorn, before which the wretch recoiled with shame and confusion.

Meantime the storm had increased without. The rain had turned to sleet and the sleet to snow. The wind had worked itself up into a tempest of fury, raging and howling about the building as if in league against the struggling woman within and only awaited its opportunity to draw her into its swirling blasts and sweep her on to destruction.

The afternoon passed away. Men were leaving their offices earlier than usual, because the storm had become so thick as to darken the rooms in the great buildings and threaten to blockade the streets and cut off the facilities for travel. Edna, though having already given up in despair, kept on going from office to office, hoping against hope; for well did she know that when once her face was turned towards her desolate room, all hope was gone.

"It is no use!" she said at last as she started to leave the building. Seeing the door leading to the law offices of Blakeslee and Krandall standing open, she said, "I will make a last trial."

"This is Colonel Blakeslee, I believe," said Edna as she entered the room. The Colonel was just drawing on his greatcoat preparatory to leaving for home.

"My name is Blakeslee," he replied, "and whom have I the pleasure of meeting? and what can I do for you?"

In going from one building to another, Edna had not been able to protect herself from the storm. Her skirts and feet were wet and her hair was in confusion. She had more the appearance of some unfortunate person who had become involved in trouble and had come to seek his legal advice, than of an

honest, capable, despairing woman in search of employment.

"Colonel Blakeslee," Edna replied in trembling voice, "my name you already know—only too well. It is Edna Lee. I have been to every store of any consequence in this city. I have spent the afternoon visiting the offices of business men in search of work by which to earn an honest living. I was about to leave the building in despair when I saw your door standing open. I have come in with a dying hope that you might have something for me to do."

Colonel Blakeslee had had many similar applications; but there was something so pathetic and yet so desperate in Edna's appearance, manner and tone, that his attention was arrested and his generous heart touched.

"Miss Lee," he said to her kindly, "sit down. You are weary." She did as he bade her, while he continued: "I hardly know what to say to you. We have all the help we need in the office at present. Besides, Mr. Krandall has gone home, and I would have to consult with him before anything could be done."

Edna's strength was rapidly giving way. During the afternoon a fever had been gradually coming on which, by the time she reached Colonel Blakeslee's office, had rendered her more than half delirious. Her fever not only stimulated, temporarily, her strength, but also caused her to utter her thoughts and feelings much more freely than ordinarily she would have done.

"Colonel Blakeslee," she said, "I did not expect

that you would have anything for me to do. I would rather sew, for that is my trade; but the women will not let me work for them—they think I am to blame for Mr. Armby's trouble. God knows—no, He does not seem to care anything about it—but I know that I would freely give this worthless life of mine if I could but restore him to his friends and give him back his good name. I have tried every way I know to find out the dark secret of that thing, but cannot. Do you know anything, Colonel? No? Well—what was it? Yes. I have thought many times of coming to you, but—no, that will do no good. I said to myself, Colonel Blakeslee is rich and strong, and everybody respects him and says that he is just and generous. If he only knew how hard and how honestly I have tried, he would help me. He has a beautiful daughter whom no doubt he greatly loves. What if she were thrown upon the world—never knew her father or mother; and had no work, no money, no food, no fuel in the house, no friends. Did Evelyn—excuse me, everybody calls her Evelyn—did she know her mother? How foolish I am—of course she did!"

Edna, in her rambling talk, had unwittingly touched the tenderest of all spots in Colonel Blakeslee's large and tender heart. If ever father worshiped a daughter, he worshiped Evelyn, his only child, whose mother breathed her last when the babe was less than ten days old. Colonel Blakeslee's strong, deep love for his wife survived and was intensified in the child she left him. When Edna spoke of Evelyn and her mother, he turned his face as if looking out of the window; but his eyes were so blinded by tears that he

saw naught save a little child and the white face of one long since departed. Meantime he had thrust his hand into his pocket and taken out some money.

"Accept this, Miss Lee," he said with a husky voice. "It will help you out for the present. You may call again to-morrow and we will see what can be done."

"Colonel Blakeslee," replied Edna, "I cannot accept any man's charity. If ——"

"It is not charity, Miss Lee, you may consider it a loan."

"When I accept a loan, knowing that I cannot return it, I am guilty of dishonesty. Besides that, you have already told me that you have all the help you need. I should have gone before this. I have already detained you too long. Good-evening!"

"Wait a moment," said he, "until I lock up and I will take you home. My carriage is waiting, and you must not go out in this storm again."

"No. I must again decline your kind offer. It does not matter whether it happens on the street, or after I reach home. Last night I said I would make one last effort. It is made and a dismal failure it has been. The sooner *finis* is written, the better."

She resolutely resisted all his persuasions to allow him to send her home in his carriage.

"Well then, good-night!" he said as he extended to her his hand. "Good heavens! woman, you are burning up with fever. Sit down in this easy chair while I call Doctor Winslow."

Without waiting for a reply, he hastened out in search of the physician, whose office was in the same building, but upon another floor. When he returned,

Edna had gone. He rang for the elevator and descended to the entrance of the building, but Edna was nowhere to be seen. She had disappeared in the storm.

The snow and slush were over the tops of Edna's shoes; the driving storm beat in her face; the swirling winds, laden with a mixture of sleet and snow, assailed her in their fury and sported with her wraps and disheveled hair as if in high glee over the power they possessed to torment their helpless victim.

"It matters little," said she. "It may be better thus. Only I would like to reach my room and welcome my visitor."

The cold air soon cooled her fever so that she was no longer delirious, but fully realized her situation. She well knew that she had a hard task before her, and that her strength was rapidly ebbing away. From time to time she sought shelter in a doorway or behind some friendly wall that she might take breath and gain sufficient strength to renew the struggle. Though she had little more than a half mile to go, it required an hour's battle with the storm to reach her cheerless home. Her shoes were filled with water, cold as ice; her skirts and underclothing were soaking wet to her knees, but she paid no attention to these things.

"Courage now for the rest of the task!" she said.

Lighting her lamp, she hurriedly composed her hair, adjusted her clothes, gathered up all the coins in one hand and took her pistol in the other as she said,

"Now let him come—the sooner the better. I am ready!"

Scarcely had she uttered these words when the door,

which she had purposely left unfastened, was cautiously pushed open and the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff entered. He was muffled up to the ears, a broad-brimmed slouch hat was pulled down over his face and he was so completely disguised that even Edna for a moment was in doubt whether, indeed, it was he; though she had had no doubt as to the person who had promised to honor her humble abode with his presence. Quickly withdrawing beneath her cloak the hand in which she held her pistol, Edna quietly awaited developments. Topliff turned to fasten the door behind him, when Edna peremptorily ordered him not only to leave it unfastened, but to leave it ajar. As it was Topliff's plan to conciliate, he did as she required.

"Why," said he, "you have no fire here. It is cold enough without leaving the door open."

"If I can stand it, you can. Come, make the object of your visit known in as few words as possible."

"You have just come in, Edna," he began in a sympathetic tone, "and must be wet and cold. Allow me to build a fire——"

"I want no fire of your making," said she. "I only want you, without further delay, to make the purpose of your visit known and then leave me, or better still, leave without making it known."

"I have come then to help you. I——"

"Let me tell you, if that is all, that I want no help from you; nor would I accept it if——"

"Edna," he broke in, "why do you repel me in this way? What have I done that you should treat me in this fashion? I have repeatedly given you to know

that I love you above any other person on earth. I repeat it now. If you will only consent to the arrangement I propose, I will——"

"I consent to nothing you propose. What have you done? I do not know; but there is something that tells me that you are at the bottom of all my troubles and distress; that you are the arch-conspirator in the ruin of that good man Albert Armby. If I could but unmask your villainy and publish your perfidy to the world and thereby exonerate him, I would freely give this poor life of mine to render him this service!"

Topliff was angered by these words and began to assume a more arrogant manner.

"I see," he said, "where your preference lies. Publish all you know. All I need to do is to deny what you say. Whose words, think you, will be accepted? I can tell you, furthermore, that if it should become necessary for me to bring witnesses to prove that your reputation is such that your word is as so much wasted breath, they are easily found. But I have not come to bandy words with you. I know your situation and have known it every day for months. I could tell you to a dollar the amount of money you had in bank up to the day when you had none. Whether I was here or a thousand miles from here, I knew, and could tell you now better than you know yourself, where you have gone and what you have done any day for the last six months. I have known each day your exact situation. I could tell all about your failures to-day. If you had obtained a situation, how long do you think you would have kept it?"

Edna was amazed at this man's infernal audacity, and trembled at the power over her life he seemed to have wielded. For a moment she stood appalled, that one of his profession and pretensions could become so infamous. Topliff saw that he had made some impression upon her, and mistaking its nature, softened his tone as he went on to say:

"Let us look at matters as they are, Edna. I have long since made up my mind that you should be mine. Since it could not be by lawful means, it must be by unlawful; since I could not win you, I have set about conquering you. You should feel highly complimented that I have gone to such lengths to win my prize. Let us come to an understanding. You have no food, no fuel, no home, no money, no friends. I have all you need; and if you will but accept it, here or elsewhere, you shall have all that heart can wish or money supply."

"Now, sir," replied Edna, "I have, I trust, heard you to a conclusion. Listen to me. Before I would accept any aid from you, I would starve or freeze to death if it took me a thousand years to die! Take your coins, made vile by coming through your criminal fingers!" So saying, she flung at his head the coins she held in her hand as she added: "You have made known your errand and received my answer. Now begone before I am tempted to give you worse reply!"

"Ha! You defy me, do you?" As he said this he started towards her. "I will show you——"

Edna sprang back, leveled her pistol at his head as she said through her set teeth, and lips white with rage,

"Move towards me but another inch and I will send a bullet through your treacherous brain!"

Her hand was as white and steady as if it had been a hand of marble; her eyes seemed to blaze along the polished barrel of her pistol; and Topliff well knew that his life depended upon the motion of the small white finger that rested upon the waiting trigger. He recoiled a step as he stammered,

"E—Edna!"

"Not another word! Leave this room instantly if you hope to leave it alive!"

Topliff slunk back to the door, opened it and glided out into the darkness.

When Colonel Blakeslee discovered that Edna had gone from the office building, he entered his carriage and ordered the driver to make all haste to his residence. But the roads were heavy and progress was slow. Upon reaching his home, he leaped from the carriage, scarcely waiting for it to come to a stop, gave the driver directions to await his return and hurriedly entered the house.

"Sump'n unus'l on de Colonel's mind," said the coachman to himself. "When he acts like dat, dar's sump'n in de wind. Hope he won't keep me settin' heah long in a storm like dis!"

The Colonel, meeting the housekeeper in the hall, exclaimed,

"Tell Evelyn to get on her wraps and come with me instantly!"

"Why, Colonel Blakeslee, what——"

"Ask no questions, but do as I bid you."

"Miss Evelyn is not here and dinner——"

"Never mind about dinner. Where is Evelyn?"

"She went to assist Mrs. Dr. Winslow at her reception. She left word to have the carriage sent for her. I have been waiting dinner——"

Colonel Blakeslee did not wait to hear her complaint about waiting dinner, but hastened to the carriage and said,

"Drive to Dr. Winslow's as quickly as possible and tell Evelyn—hold, I will go with you."

Not all the guests had gone when Colonel Blakeslee reached Dr. Winslow's. They were much surprised to see him abruptly enter without having gone through the formality of ringing.

"Why, Colonel," some of his old acquaintances began, "how glad we are to see you! Good gracious! Colonel, what is the matter?"

Without stopping to reply, he requested to see the Doctor immediately.

"Why, father!" exclaimed Evelyn, "what can have happened?"

"No time is to be lost, my darling. Ask me no questions at present, but get on your wraps as quickly as possible."

Evelyn had long since learned unquestioning obedience to her father's commands—not only because of his authority, but still more because of her confidence and love. However, while getting on her wraps, she was in a tremble of agitation.

"What on earth can have happened to throw him into such feverish haste? And he called for Dr. Winslow, too! I never saw such a look on his face nor heard such a tone in his voice!"

Meantime the Doctor had appeared and gone aside with Colonel Blakeslee. The words of the two men, while earnest, were not loud enough to be overheard, though some of the ladies strained their ears until they fairly ached, trying to catch the drift of the conversation. But as Evelyn appeared at that moment, they were doomed to disappointment. She and her father, with hasty courtesy, took leave of the company. After the Colonel had placed his daughter in the carriage, he gave the coachman his directions which, owing to the roar of the storm, Evelyn could not hear. He then entered the carriage which rolled away with a dull, muffled rumble scarcely audible above the voice of the tempest.

"Now, father, what is it?"

"Nothing, Evelyn, that need alarm you. We have been guilty of a great error and go to do all we can to correct our mistake—if, indeed, we are not too late. I do not feel like uttering the words that would suitably describe our errand; but if you will be patient a few moments, you shall know all. Will that do, my little one?"

"It shall be as you wish, father," said Evelyn.

They both sat in silence the rest of the way, he busy with his own thoughts, she wondering what the error could be to which her father had alluded, and why such haste was required in its correction. While she was trying, but in vain, to form some satisfactory notion of the affair, the carriage came to a stop. Colonel Blakeslee looked out, descended from the carriage and aided Evelyn to alight.

"Where are we, father?" said she. "I never saw this lonely place before."

He made no reply; but taking her arm in his, led the way towards the door of Edna's cottage. So thick and blinding was the storm that they did not observe, until within a few feet of the door, that a little woman dressed in black and so muffled up that no one could have told whether she was young or old, was standing on the steps, one hand resting against the door post, while something in the other glistened in the dim light that shone through the slightly open door. This woman started at the approach of Colonel Blakeslee and Evelyn, then raised her finger to her lips in token of silence and made a sign for them to listen. They did so. As they heard Topliff's recital of the deliberate, heartless and even fiendish cruelties to which he had resorted to reduce Edna to submission, Colonel Blakeslee, with indignation flashing from his eyes, more than once started to enter the room; but the mysterious little woman restrained him as one who had an authority not to be disputed. She beckoned to him. He held his head down to her while she whispered in his ear,

"As you love justice and value human life, wait and hear all that may be said."

When Edna met Topliff's vaunting threats with her defiance, and especially when she charged him with being the author of her misery and of Albert Armby's ruin, Evelyn trembled with an agitation she could not control, while the tears stole down her cheeks. At the point where Topliff was about to attempt violence upon Edna, the Little Woman in Black, unobserved

either by Edna or Topliff, pushed the door open a little further, tightened her grasp upon whatever she held in her right hand and stood prepared to spring with the fury of a panther upon Edna's tormentor.

As Topliff glided out of the room, Evelyn, followed closely by her father, entered while the strange little woman pursued the retreating clergyman even as a shadow follows its substance. Upon reaching the gate, she caught him by his long hair with the grasp of an eagle's talon.

"As you value your life, stand still and keep silence," she demanded beneath her breath. "As you have watched and followed that poor child, so have I watched you. Do you feel the touch of this steel against your brazen cheek?" He shuddered as he felt the cold, keen point of a dagger against his face. "Well may you tremble," she added. "Ere you could have laid your heavy hand upon her, this steel would have found its way to your base heart! Do you want to know who I am?" Then she almost hissed a name in his ear that made him stagger and groan as if, indeed, the dagger had been plunged into his heart. "Go!" she said, "and remember that there is one at least who knows all the depths of your villainy!"

The reaction from the intense strain upon Edna was instant and overwhelming. She sank into a chair as the Colonel and Evelyn entered the room. Evelyn threw herself upon her knees, buried her face in Edna's lap and cried,

"O! my poor, poor sister, forgive me the wrong I

have done you! I am unworthy to look you in the face!"

Edna's right hand had fallen down by the side of the chair, the pistol fell from her grasp upon the floor, while her head dropped forward upon her breast. Evelyn caught her hand between her own.

"Good heavens! father," she exclaimed, "her hand is cold as ice! She is dead!"

The strange Little Woman in Black who had just entered, rushed to Edna, threw her arms around the unconscious girl and cried,

"Dead! Dead! Did you say she is dead? Merciful God, this must not be!"

Colonel Blakeslee gently put the woman aside, placed his ear over Edna's heart and, after listening a moment, said,

"No, she still lives; but we have not a moment to lose."

He took off his greatcoat, put it around Edna, took her up in his strong arms as if she had been a child, carried her to the carriage, put her tenderly on one of the cushioned seats—her head resting on Evelyn's lap, took his seat beside the coachman and ordered him to drive home with all haste. Edna was taken to Evelyn's room and placed in Evelyn's own clean, soft bed. Dr. Winslow, who was in waiting, after making a hasty examination, shook his head saying,

"We have a hard fight on our hands with scarcely one hope in our favor."

Edna's wet clothes were removed, one of Evelyn's dainty gowns was put upon her and the long, hard struggle between life and death began.

CHAPTER XXII

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

NEARLY an hour after Edna was brought to the Blakeslee mansion, a servant announced to the Colonel that there was a lady in the reception-hall who wished to see him. Upon entering the hall, he recognized the little woman he had seen at Edna's cottage.

"I am glad to see you, madam," he said. "I owe you an apology and beg to assure you that I meant no discourtesy at the cottage. I felt that the life of the young woman might depend upon very prompt action."

"I had not even thought of it," replied the woman. "I have come to ask about her. How is she? Has she a good doctor and a nurse? Tell me about her."

"She is in a very precarious condition. Dr. Winslow is with her. He says there is scarcely any chance for her recovery. We have no nurse as yet; but will find one in the morning."

"Colonel Blakeslee, let me nurse her. Dr. Winslow will let me I know. Tell him I said so."

"Come into the sitting-room, madam; you are cold and your clothing is wet."

"I thank you; but I am not cold. Please go and tell Dr. Winslow that I am here and will nurse the poor girl."

Colonel Blakeslee went to the Doctor and told him about the woman and her actions at the cottage.

"She has followed through this terrible storm and offers herself as a nurse. I do not know what to make of her. To satisfy her, I have come to you with her request. We will have to have a nurse, but of course she will not do."

"What is her name?" asked the Doctor.

"Upon my soul, I did not think to ask her, and she did not tell me. She spoke as if you knew her."

"What kind of looking woman is she?"

"I did not notice her face particularly. She is rather small and slender and is dressed in black."

"O, yes! I know who she is. She is fairly magical in her influence over sick people. It is a wonder though, that she should offer her services in this case. I have often tried to get her to nurse my patients in wealthy families. Her reply has always been, 'The rich can easily find nurses; but the poor cannot.' She prefers to nurse the poor for a pittance rather than the rich for liberal pay."

"She said she had become interested in Miss Lee and would like to become her nurse."

"That accounts for it. Take her by all means; but say nothing to her about pay. When she is through, you can pay her what you like."

Colonel Blakeslee returned to the little woman and said,

"We will be very glad to have you nurse this young lady through her sickness; and from what the Doctor tells me, we are very fortunate in getting you."

Colonel Blakeslee conducted the woman up to the

sick chamber, and leaving Edna in the care of Evelyn, the nurse and Dr. Winslow, he retired to his own room. But somehow his agitation would not subside. He walked the floor with the air of one who has something weighty upon his mind and possibly upon his heart. After continuing his walk for a quarter of an hour, he sat down in a large easy chair before an open grate in which glowed a bright and comfortable fire. Neither the easy chair nor the glowing fire seemed capable of setting this grand man at ease; for he was soon walking the floor again, his hands behind his back and his eyes upon the figures of the carpet which he did not even see. He was yonder in the great office building while the storm raged without, listening to a little woman who was burning with fever and chattering half deliriously of her own trials, and of his daughter and her long since departed mother.

Again he stood in the blinding storm at the door of a lonely cottage and heard the same little woman hurl into the face of her tormentor the defiance of despair, when at the cost of her honor she might have possessed all the comforts that money could buy. Once more he gathered the stricken little woman up into his strong arms, bore her to his carriage, brought her to his own comfortable home and carried her as if she had been a child to Evelyn's room. All this he lived over and over again, forgetful of everything else, until the housekeeper tapped at his door and wanted to know if he was not coming down to dinner.

The next morning after Topliff's visit to Edna's cottage, Colonel Blakeslee was in close consultation with

two or three of his most intimate friends, who with him had been quietly on the alert to unravel the mystery in which the Armby matter had been shrouded.

"Some subtle and skilful villain is at the bottom of this affair," said Judge Truman. "I confess that my wits have been completely baffled."

"I do not know," replied Colonel Blakeslee, "that I have discovered the bottom villain, but I think I have accidentally stumbled upon one who has a complete understanding with him."

They all knew that Colonel Blakeslee was a man of few words and that when he spoke every word was significant.

"Have you found out anything?" his friends eagerly asked.

"What I have to say must of course be in strictest confidence. We have long believed that Dr. Topliff knows more about that affair than he would care to tell. Something happened last night which removes every shadow of doubt."

Colonel Blakeslee then briefly related what he had seen and heard the night before.

"Colonel Blakeslee," said Judge Truman, "I do not doubt a word you say; but there are not a dozen men in this town whom I would have believed if they had told me on oath what you have just related. I am amazed!"

"While I have known for a long time," replied Colonel Blakeslee, "of Topliff's tyrannical methods, and while his vanity and insincerity have been very offensive to me, it seems scarcely possible even now that he is capable of such infamy."

"Does he know that he was overheard?"

"He must have seen us as he left the cottage, but owing to the blinding storm he may not have recognized us. I do not think he did. Of course it will soon be known that we have taken Miss Lee to our house. He can then easily guess who we were. But if we do not say anything about it, you may be sure he will not."

"May not Evelyn or the woman you told us of speak about it to some one?"

"There is no danger of it. For some strange reason the little woman seems profoundly interested in the matter. I have explained both to her and Evelyn the importance of keeping the affair absolutely quiet."

"My opinion is," said Judge Truman, "that we have struck a trail which if judiciously followed will lead to the den of worse than thieves where the monstrous plot to ruin Mr. Armby had its birth. Hitherto I have been unable to find an adequate motive for such a conspiracy. I see one now."

As a result of this consultation the keenest sleuths in the service of Armby's friends were put upon the scent and in due time the essential facts of the whole abominable conspiracy were in their hands.

For weeks Edna hovered between life and death. Her blood seemed on fire with fever. Much of the time she was delirious, in which condition she would at times talk as if she were a child being illy treated and without friends; again she would babble about a long ride, broad prairies, great rivers and cities, and of people who were good to her. At other times she was in school, or among friends, or busily engaged in

business transactions. Very often she would imagine herself on the back of her horse flying over the road or climbing some mountain path. At such times she would caress her pillow or bed clothing and murmur endearing words among which Evelyn, who was her constant attendant, could distinguish "my lover!" At these moments Evelyn, with an anxious and troubled expression on her face, would listen intently to catch every word. Sometimes Edna would be repelling some imaginary enemy whom she seemed to loathe as she would a serpent, or living over again her hardships and struggles. At such times Evelyn would bend over the sufferer, smooth her forehead and seek to comfort her by assurances that she was among friends and had nought to fear. But when she talked incoherently of Albert Armby, as she often did, Evelyn would fairly strain her ears to hear what was said.

Evelyn was not narrow minded, suspicious nor jealous; but she was human, and very naturally desired to learn all she could as to the real relation between her lover and this woman with whom he had, apparently, become so hopelessly involved. Evelyn Blakeslee was truly a noble minded woman whose confidence in Armby had never been for a moment shaken. She now saw she had been guilty of a great injustice in holding Edna Lee responsible for Armby's trouble. Ever since the night when she became aware of the desperate straits to which the poor girl had been reduced and heard Edna hurl defiance into the teeth of Topliff and denounce him as the arch conspirator to ruin Albert Armby, she had felt that Edna Lee was

nobility personified. She also felt that if Edna should die, she herself would not be wholly free from blame. She would not therefore leave the sufferer's side except when compelled to do so. Though a more skilful and attentive nurse could not have been found than the little woman whom Colonel Blakeslee had employed, still Evelyn administered the medicines, gave the refreshments, bathed the patient's fevered brow with her own hands and felt it to be a labor of love.

During the weeks of Edna's illness, Colonel Blakeslee often visited the sick chamber. He would look earnestly into the face now flushed with fever, take one of the small hot hands into his and yearn to impart to the sufferer a share of his own great strength and vitality. After every visit of Dr. Winslow, he would call the Doctor into the study and inquire earnestly of the patient's condition.

He alarmed himself one day by the self-inflicted question,

"Suppose it were Evelyn?"

He tried to resist the force of the question; but it would come out.

"If it were she I could not be more anxious than I am!"

If some one had said to him at any time during his anxiety and suspense on account of Edna's illness,

"Colonel Blakeslee, don't you think you love that little woman a wee bit?" he would have been rebuffed with the blunt answer,

"Nonsense! you are a fool!" or something like it.

Dr. Winslow called every morning and again at

night and often remained until near the dawn of day. One afternoon after he had visited the sick chamber, he and Colonel Blakeslee were sitting in the latter's library enjoying their cigars together.

"If she recovers," said the Doctor, "she will have Evelyn Blakeslee to thank for it. She would have died before this if Evelyn had let her."

"I am bound to say," replied the Colonel, "that she would have been in her grave before this but for the tireless attention and vigilance of Dr. Winslow."

"I have done my best for her; but Evelyn has held right to her with a will that would not let go, and has hovered over her and poured her own vitality into the girl and kept her alive when, in my belief, she would have died in spite of all my efforts. I don't think Evelyn could stand the strain upon her vitality another week."

"What do you think of the outlook this morning, Doctor?"

"She has escaped the dangers I feared most at first, that is complications—especially of the brain; but another danger remains which I fear now more than I feared the others. Her vitality is so nearly exhausted, that when the fever leaves her she is liable to collapse utterly."

"Do you not think," said the Colonel, "you had better tell Evelyn about that, so that she may be on her guard and know what to do when the crisis comes?"

"I have given the nurse careful instructions; but if you think best I will speak to Evelyn also."

"I wish you would, Doctor. Evelyn tells me the nurse becomes very nervous and excited sometimes

when she is near Miss Lee. I think Evelyn would be more composed and less liable to make a mistake."

A servant was sent to call Evelyn. While he was gone Colonel Blakeslee said,

"I must tell you, Doctor, that if Miss Lee should die, it would come very near being the death of Evelyn. I never knew her to be so affected by anything."

At this juncture Evelyn entered. Dr. Winslow was right respecting the effect of Edna's sickness upon Evelyn. Nearly all the color had left her cheeks; her eyes were heavy, while the circles beneath them showed all too plainly the strain under which she had been laboring. The wonted mobility of body and elasticity of step were gone. All this was painfully apparent to Colonel Blakeslee, now that his attention had been called to it.

"Sit down, Evelyn," he said with more than usual tenderness in his voice. "The Doctor wishes to give you some directions concerning Miss Lee."

Evelyn grew paler still as she seated herself, fearing that the Doctor was about to impart to her some dreaded information.

"Your father and I, Evelyn," began the Doctor, "think it best to prepare you for——"

"For God's sake, Dr. Winslow, don't tell me that——"

"No! no! little one," broke in her father, "he is only going to tell you how to meet a possible emergency."

"Oh!" said Evelyn, "I beg your pardon, Doctor!"

"It is I," replied the Doctor, "who should beg pardon for not having first allayed your fears. The crisis

is passed, so far as complications are concerned. The fever is gradually subsiding and may leave her at any time. When it does she is liable to die of exhaustion. Much will depend upon the first moment of her consciousness. If she sees any one or anything or hears a word that reminds her of that dreadful night, the shock will kill her. When the fever leaves, there will only be a flutter of the heart action left. The slightest excitement, and it will fail altogether. At the moment her consciousness returns, I want her to have all the stimulant she will take. I have told you this that you may know what to expect and what to do."

From that hour Evelyn watched the patient with unceasing vigilance, while the Colonel refused to leave the house, though messages were sent from his colleagues that pressing business demanded his attention.

About ten o'clock the next day, Evelyn was seated upon the edge of the bed by Edna's side, holding one of the little wasted hands in hers. Edna was lying with her eyes closed as if in sleep. The peculiar, tremulous fever breath was gone. It seemed as if she hardly breathed at all. Evelyn lifted her finger to the little nurse, who arose from a couch at the other end of the room, came noiselessly to the head of the bed and stood so that she could see Edna's face without being seen by her. The dreaded, joyous moment had come. Evelyn's heart thumped away as if it were trying to beat for two. She hovered over the patient as if trying to impart to her a portion of her own rich life. Edna slowly turned her head, first to one side, then the other, and then rested with her face up-

turned as before. She brought her thin hand to her forehead and passed it slowly over her face and rested it again upon her bosom. Then the blue eyes opened just a trifle and closed again. Evelyn's heart thumped harder than ever, while the little nurse looked on scarcely daring to breathe. In less than a minute Edna's eyes opened wide and saw the sweet face and great brown eyes of Evelyn Blakeslee smiling ineffably above her. Gently Evelyn's face bent down while she tenderly kissed the forehead, the cheeks, the lips beneath. What a divine awakening from a long and troubled dream!

"Listen to me, Edna," (never was there a sweeter smile), "you have been sick, but are getting well now. You are not to talk or make any exertion. Drink this that the Doctor left for you and then take a nap. When you awake again we will have a little talk."

With this she administered the stimulant and kissed her again saying,

"There, now, go to sleep."

Edna's lips moved as if she were about to speak, but Evelyn gently touched them with her finger and shook her head, the smile still beaming from her face.

"Not now, little one—not till after the nap. Shut your eyes. There, now!"

Edna slowly closed her eyes without having uttered a word and fell almost instantly into a sweet and restoring sleep. The little nurse, unable to control her feelings, had retreated to an adjoining room where Evelyn followed, when they fell into each other's arms and wept for joy.

After the crisis was safely passed, Colonel Blakeslee

went down town in such a cheerful mood and with such a beaming face, that his business associates wondered among themselves what good stroke of fortune had come the Colonel's way. He was exuberance itself.

CHAPTER XXIII

ABSENCE

EDNA's vigorous constitution was not seriously impaired nor her excellent health permanently shattered by her illness, severe as it had been. She rallied quickly. Within three or four weeks she was practically restored to her usual health.

Nothing could be more beautiful than the loving friendship that grew up between Evelyn Blakeslee and Edna Lee. They were nearly of the same age, but of different temperaments. They harmonized by contrast; they were complements each to the other. Edna was early given to understand that she was not to think of leaving the Blakeslee mansion, but that it was to be her home as freely as if she had been born and raised there. The two young ladies were constant companions on the street, at church, at the theatre, and in the cutter behind Edna's fleet-footed black horse. It was here that Edna's vivacious spirit revived once more.

"Ah! my lover," she would say, "if you let those naughty horses pass you—but you won't, will you?"

And he did not.

"I will tell you some day, sister," for such they often called each other, "why my horse and I are so fond of each other."

"Tell me now!"

"O, it would take too long. I call him my lover, you see. He is the only lover I have—the only one I want. But Evelyn, you have the best lover in the world. If I had the love of such a man, I should feel myself the richest woman on earth."

Evelyn Blakeslee was like all other good and sensible women in that she was pleased to hear others speak in praise of the man she loved. There had been a time, however, when she would have resented such words coming from Edna Lee. But thank goodness, that day had passed. More than one very confidential talk they had had about their love affairs, Edna praising Armby to the skies and Evelyn blushing and saying "Amen!" in her heart.

"Well, Edna," said Evelyn as the black horse swung along at an easy trot, "of course I expect him to think more of me than of any one else; but I must tell you that he has a very warm place in his heart for my little sister."

"And I want to tell you that I love him—all I dare to!"

The girls laughed heartily while at the same time they both meant every word they said.

During Edna's convalescence, and while she made her home at his house, Colonel Blakeslee almost abandoned the clubs and lodges to spend his evenings—with Evelyn, of course.

And Edna? Well, she thought there was no other such man living as Colonel Blakeslee. And what of that? Did not Evelyn think the same? And they were both right most likely. Edna always added this modifying clause, "unless it should be Mr. Armby;"

and to this also, Evelyn agreed perfectly. Not that the girls ever actually talked the matter over between them; but they agreed without discussing it. It must be added by way of emphasis, that Colonel Blakeslee had no doubt in the world that there were not two other such girls under the sun.

Albert had gone out in the early part of the summer. The autumn had passed, the winter worn away and spring had come again; but no word from him had been received.

Long and anxiously had Evelyn looked for his letter while Edna wondered why he had not kept his promise to write to her.

After dinner one evening, Albert's absence was, as usual, the theme of conversation.

"Father, why don't Albert write to you? Do you think anything has happened?" asked Evelyn.

"You mean why has he not written to you, don't you, little one?" replied the Colonel with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Evelyn blushed while she playfully tweaked her father's nose. Then she grew more serious as she said with evident anxiety in her voice,

"But father, nearly a year has passed and no one has heard a word from him."

"Time must have dragged heavily with you. It lacks more than three months of being a year. Probably he had no opportunity of sending word before winter set in. There is no travel at all between the Deep River and here during the winter. It will be late in the spring before the snow will have sufficiently melted to permit any one to come through."

"Well," replied Evelyn, "I think we ought to have heard from him long ago, don't you, Edna?"

"O, the hearts of you girls will not listen to reason, but clamor for the promised message. I guess you will have to get one even if we must employ a bird to bring it."

One fine morning early in June, the bell in the hall of the Blakeslee mansion set up such a clamor that one might easily have imagined it was railing at the rough looking man on the outside who had just given it such a vigorous shaking up. Of the servant who came to learn the cause of the noisy disturbance, the caller demanded to know if Miss Blakeslee were at home.

"What do you want with Miss Blakeslee?" was the rather irritable answer of the servant.

"I have a package for her," replied the man.

"Give it to me, I will take it to her."

"No you won't. My orders is to give it to Miss Blakeslee, and to no one else."

The servant shut the door in the man's face, went to Evelyn's room and told her what the man had said. Soon the door opened again, revealing the charming form of Evelyn Blakeslee clad in a loose morning gown from beneath which peeped the daintiest beslippered foot the rough miner had ever seen. Off came the slouched sombrero while with a low but awkward bow, the man inquired for Miss Blakeslee. Evelyn's heart beat tumultuously while the blood mounted to her cheeks heightening yet more her exquisite beauty. She felt that at last tidings had come from the man she loved. But were they good or ill?

"I am Miss Blakeslee," said she in tremulous tones.

"I thought so!" said the man, with another bow. "I have a package for you."

So saying he took from the depths of one of his great pockets a little packet and handed it to her, with another of his awkward courtesies. Evelyn took the package. So eager was she to open it and learn its contents that she was about to repeat the discourtesy of the servant, when the man said,

"Beg pardon, ma'am. I was to tell you that I will start back next Monday mornin' and before leavin' will call for any answer you may want to send."

"I owe you an apology, my friend," said she. "Won't you come in?"

"No, ma'am, thank you. Shall I call Sunday evenin' fer your answer?"

"I shall be very glad if you will."

"Good-mornin', ma'am!"

"Good-morning!"

With trembling fingers she opened the package and found it contained two envelopes, one addressed to herself, the other to Edna Lee.

"O, Edna!" she exclaimed as she mounted the stairs all in a flutter, "I have a letter from my Albert and he has sent you one also!"

She then hurried to her room, shut the door and read:

"MY OWN DEAR EVELYN:—

"At last the longed-for opportunity has come to send you the promised letter; and if the privilege of committing my thoughts and feelings to paper and sending them to you gives me such pleasure, what would be the rapture of seeing you face to face, of looking into those loving eyes and telling you all that is in my heart? When in

the city, I often longed to escape to the solitude of the mountains and throw off the burden of responsibility and care so inseparable from my duties to such a multitude; but now I realize that the happiest days I have ever known were those spent in my labors among the people I so dearly loved.

"I was satisfied, my dear Evelyn, to know that you were near and that I could drop in and spend an hour with you at any time; but banished by a cruel fate from your presence, I find to my unspeakable sorrow how great is my deprivation, how irreparable my loss. I would not have believed that a man could come to feel so helplessly dependent upon a woman! Every cord, save the one that binds us together, has wofully weakened, while some alas! which I deemed so strong, have parted utterly. I promised you that when I should write, I would open to its inmost depths my heart and lay it bare to you. I do so. When I left X—— I felt so strong in my faith in God, and in the belief that my vindication would come and that speedily. But I must tell you, my dearest Evelyn, that the clouds betwixt me and the heavens above have become so thick and dark that I can neither see through them nor beyond them. The sinister question is ever present with me: If there is a God who knows and cares and is all powerful, why did He allow this crushing calamity to fall upon me and upon those I love? I confess to you, my dearest, as I would not to any other, that there comes to me no reassuring reply.

"I doubt if this wild region is a suitable place for one in this frame of mind. The very ruggedness and wildness of the mountain crags and the yawning chasms between, invite to reckless and defiant moods. I tremble to think what might have been ere this, but for the restraining thought that there is yonder one of the purest and noblest of women, who loves me and believes in me! I have felt and I do now feel that I cannot—must not by any act of mine, bring a single pang to her heart or disappoint the faith she has in me.

"I would not have you think I have given up all hope. I cannot, so long as I have your confidence and love. While I do not see how this dark cloud is to be lifted, there is still the remnant of a hope that some day it will be rolled back and the light of a better day dawn.

"My own Evelyn, let me ask you once more to befriend that unfortunate little woman who is involved with me in this seeming ruin.

I know how cruel the world is and how hopeless she will be to stem the tide of disaster which had already set in against her before I left. Unless some good friends go to her rescue, I am afraid she may drift into utter despair. I know that I cannot appeal to your generous heart in her behalf, in vain. I send in your care a letter which I trust you will cause to be delivered to her.

"The messenger by whom I send this will bring your reply and I shall wait for it as those who watch, wait for the coming of the morning. I think of you always with a loving heart.

"ALBERT."

In his letter to Edna, Albert carefully refrained from even the slightest intimation of the strain upon his faith and upon his hope of final vindication. Throughout, it breathed the spirit of tenderest sympathy and hopeful encouragement. More than once a feeling of envy towards Evelyn arose in Edna's heart, but she resolutely thrust it down. She had learned to love Evelyn too sincerely to indulge any unfriendly feeling towards her. As for Evelyn, every word of Albert's appeal to her in Edna's behalf smote her tender conscience with keenest reproach. When she had read her letter through, she entered Edna's room, her large eyes filled with tears.

"Why, Evelyn! What is the matter? Is there any——"

Evelyn threw her arms about Edna whom she kissed with great tenderness. She then handed Edna the letter, pointed to the words relating to her, sank into a chair and gave way to copious tears.

When the messenger returned to the Deep River country, he bore with him two letters to Albert Armby, from one of which a few paragraphs are here given.

"My Dearest Albert:

"Your letter was as the coming of the dawn after a long night of anxious waiting. . . . I sympathize with you in your despondent and almost reckless moods; but, dearest Albert, the day is beginning to dawn. More I dare not say on paper, though my heart yearns to tell you much I know. . . .

"Rest assured, my Albert, that my faith in you and my love have not changed except to grow stronger and deeper with the passing days.

"I must tell you, that while for almost every reason I deplore the disaster of a year ago, I shall never cease to be thankful for it on one account. While I knew I loved you, I often wondered whether my love was different from that of other people—I may say of other women. There were hundreds of women who loved you deeply and purely for your worth and for your work's sake; and I used to ask myself, 'in what does my love for him differ from the love of others?' But when your misfortune came and the love of others failed, mine grew all the stronger and clung all the closer. I then became aware that it was Albert Armby I loved for his own sake, and that my love was such that I would gladly share poverty and disgrace with him and count it all joy. This precious jewel has shone with ever increasing lustre, where else, all must have been impenetrable night. . . .

"If it be true that my confidence and love have, even in a small degree, held you from drifting into doubt and possible despair, I am unutterably grateful. It is also true that I cannot bear the thought that you should ever go out of my life! With me you need no vindication. All that Evelyn Blakeslee has to give is yours, whether in the eyes of the world you are ever exonerated or not. . . .

"Concerning Edna Lee, the enclosed letter from her will speak for itself. I will only say that never has it been my good fortune to come in touch with a nobler girl. But I will tell you all about it when I see you again, which, I trust will be very soon.

"With loving prayers for your speedy return, I am your own.

"Evelyn."

CHAPTER XXIV

LINKS IN THE CHAIN

MEANTIME Armby's friends had not been idle. So soon as they realized the full magnitude of the disaster, the shrewdest detectives that could be found were put upon the case. Every livery stable in the city was visited, but without finding a clew. But few horses had been let out on the fatal night and they only to well-known and reliable people.

Accompanied by Armby, the detectives visited all the narrow and suspicious streets near the corner of Sixth and Maple. But he could not positively identify any of them as the one into which he had been driven. Many houses bore some resemblance to the one into which he had been decoyed. None of them, however, could be pointed out with certainty as the right one. One old, dilapidated wooden building attracted more attention than any other. It was a story-and-a-half house on the west side of a narrow, dingy street, the front door of which opened into a long narrow hall. But one family lived on the street in the same block. From this family it was learned that the house had recently been occupied by two men—one a thick, heavy set man, the other taller and not so stout. They had vacated the house only a few days before. A thorough search was made for Ned Franklin and Burly Bill, but they had vanished.

The detectives worked at a disadvantage because no adequate motive for a conspiracy could be conceived. If these disreputable men conspired to decoy Armby to this isolated house, overpower him, carry him to Edna's and set the police upon him under the most suspicious circumstances, what were they to gain? They had never approached Armby with efforts at blackmail. He did not remember ever to have seen them before the day of his trial. Clearly, then, they must have been the tools of some one else. Of whom? What could have been the motive of the unknown arch-conspirator?

The sleuths were more than half suspicious that there was no plot, but that Armby and his friends were throwing dust in the eyes of the people by their cry of conspiracy.

Several weeks passed and still there was no clew until a well-known and highly respected lady called at the office of Judge Truman and requested a personal interview. When shown into the Judge's private office, she said,

"I have an important suggestion to make in regard to the Armby affair on condition that my name shall never be mentioned to anybody."

"Of course your wishes shall be respected."

The lady looked about as if to assure herself that no one else was near, and then said under her breath,

"I have reason to think that Mrs. Topliff knows more about that matter than she would care to tell."

"What makes you think so?"

"She is in high glee over Mr. Armby's downfall and regards it a great triumph for somebody."

"How do you know this, Mrs. ——?"

"She has been talking too much of late."

"What did she say?"

"O, you lawyers never get done asking questions. What she said, she would doubtless repeat to some one who may be willing to tell you."

"But how do you know she did the talking?"

"There you go again! I will answer this one, but you are not to ask me another—I heard her."

Not many days after this interview, a strange lady called on Mrs. Topliff.

"Is Dr. Topliff at home?" she inquired.

"Mr. Topliff is out of the city," was the reply.

"Is Mrs. Topliff in?"

"I am Mrs. Topliff."

"O, I am very glad to see you, Mrs. Topliff. I am Mrs. Affleck, and have been referred to you for some information I would like to get."

Mrs. Topliff had stood in the half open door with the evident intention not to admit the stranger; but the visitor was so winning in her manner and her words were so gently spoken that Mrs. Topliff so far relaxed her frigidity as to open the door a little wider. The caller took advantage of this relaxation and stepped up into the hallway as Mrs. Topliff asked somewhat curtly,

"Information about what?"

"It would take some time to explain fully," said Mrs. Affleck as she inched her way a little further into the hall. Then with a bewitching smile, she added: "I asked to be referred to the most prominent and influential minister in the city and was sent here.

Though Mr. Topliff is not at home, you may be able to give me the desired information. If it is not convenient to see me now, I will call at another time."

Mrs. Topliff's ice gorge gave way entirely under the warmth of these flattering words; the door swung wide open and the stranger, with great cordiality, was shown into the parlor.

"What a pleasant home you have, Mrs. Topliff. Your people must be very kind to provide you——"

"This is our own house Mrs.—— I beg your pardon——"

"Affleck."

"Mrs. Affleck, to be sure, how dull I am—yes, we are fortunate enough to own our home. Thank goodness! we are not dependent upon the grudging charity of the people either for a home or our living."

"How is that, Mrs. Topliff? I supposed all ministers were supported by the people."

"Mr. Topliff draws a liberal salary from the missionary funds—and it is paid—not merely promised."

"You are to be envied, Mrs. Topliff."

"And we are envied!"

"In no ungenerous spirit, I hope? I have known Mr. Topliff by reputation for many years, and I am sure he deserves all he receives."

"Indeed he does. He has made the church in this section. When we came out here nearly twenty-five years ago, there was nothing. Now our people are numbered by the thousands."

"Indeed!" said the stranger. "By the way, Mrs. Topliff, you have just touched on the matter I wished to see you about. The house by which I am em-

ployed sent me out to obtain facts and statistics to be used in a work we are preparing on the growth of the churches in the great west. It is to be a very fine book, giving a history of religious movements, biographical sketches of the leading workers and full page cuts of the most prominent leaders. You see now why I was referred to you."

"We shall be delighted to render you any assistance we can," replied Mrs. Topliff; "but of course you will have to see Mr. Topliff."

"Certainly. When will he return?"

"That is uncertain. He is off on one of his trips through the Mission and may be gone a week or more."

"I presume, Mrs. Topliff, that you can put me in the way of getting some information so that I need not be idle while waiting for Dr. Topliff's return."

"I suppose," replied Mrs. Topliff, "that there are some books and papers in Mr. Topliff's study that might help you."

"If I may have access to them, I will be greatly obliged; but I will not have time to-day. I must see some of the other ministers and arrange with them. I came to you first because of the well-known prominence of Dr. Topliff. I shall give your denomination and the Doctor's connection with its growth, first place. You will not object to having a nice cut of yourself in the book?"

"Really, Mrs. Affleck——"

"Never mind. I shall see that one goes in unless you positively forbid. Now, Mrs. Topliff, when will it suit your convenience to have me come?"

"At any time—it makes no difference to me."

"Suppose I come to-morrow."

"Just as you like."

"As it is a business matter I will come to-morrow forenoon."

"All right."

"You have put me under great obligations, Mrs. Topliff, and you shall not lose anything by it."

The visitor went her way, leaving Mrs. Topliff with an unusually good opinion of herself, and with an exalted conception of the importance of her husband.

Mrs. Affleck returned the next morning. During her absence, Mrs. Topliff had rummaged her husband's library and ransacked his desks in search of books and papers bearing on the subject of Mrs. Affleck's visit. All these she put at the disposal of the visitor, not forgetting to place conspicuously a set of scrap-books in which all the good things printed in the newspapers about the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff, had been carefully pasted.

"Really, Mrs. Topliff, the Doctor must owe a large measure of his success and popularity to your good sense and helpfulness."

"O, I don't know, I——"

"Of course I don't expect you to acknowledge it; but it is my business to find out such things. Some excellent people have been telling me about your devotion to the interests of your husband. And while they have no doubt of the great ability of Dr. Topliff, they do not hesitate to say that he owes much to you."

"I have tried to help him all I could; but——"

"There, now, Mrs. Topliff; I will not allow you to depreciate yourself. But I must get to work."

Mrs. Topliff left the visitor in the study, while she herself went about her household duties in the most thorough good humor with herself, and with a very high appreciation of the discernment and good sense of Mrs. Affleck. Mrs. Topliff's self-importance grew amazingly. Her place in the forthcoming book would be second only to that of her husband; and if entire justice were done, it would be second to none.

The visitor came and went at will, and always fed Mrs. Amanda Topliff a few sweet morsels to fatten still further her growing self-esteem. Mrs. Topliff came to the study one afternoon and said,

"Mrs. Affleck, I have an engagement this afternoon and will be out two or three hours. I leave things in your care."

"Really, Mrs. Topliff, I shall feel lonely without you in the house. But I shall be busy with my work. A pleasant afternoon to you!"

The visitor stepped to a window and watched Mrs. Topliff as that important lady disappeared down the street, musing upon the never failing good sense and pleasing manners of Mrs. Affleck. Then turning from the window, she began deliberately to examine every desk and drawer, nook and corner in Dr. Topliff's study. One drawer she found securely locked. She tried to spring the lock but it resisted her efforts, skilful as they were. Then she took from a small valise a large bunch of keys of all sizes and shapes. She tried a dozen or more on the stubborn lock, but without avail. Taking a ball of wax from her satchel,

she held it between her hands to soften it and then pressed it into the keyhole of the drawer. Carefully withdrawing the wax, she compared with it key after key, until at last her face lighted up with satisfaction. She thrust the key she had selected into the lock. After two or three efforts, the bolt turned and the drawer was opened.

"Ha! Ha! One of the jolly kind!" said she, taking from the drawer first a box of cigars and then a flask of brandy. "Humph!" she exclaimed in disappointment, about to close the drawer. Mechanically, she drew the drawer further out before closing it, and discovered a compartment at the back—a sort of drawer within a drawer. Here she found a number of papers. Among them was a large unsealed envelope marked "private," within which she found a piece of coarse writing paper. It bore evidence of having been crumpled, but had been straightened out and carefully folded. With an expression of surprise and intense satisfaction, she read,

"May ———.

"MR. ARMBY:

"Sur—My sun hez bin hurt and can't live till mornin. He sez he wants to hev a minister afore he dize. I no you will kum. The barer will fetch you and show you the way. Kum quick, or you'll be to late.

"A FATHER IN DISTRESS."

Mrs. Affleck stood a moment as if undecided what to do. Then she folded the paper and put it in a small pocket within her satchel. After a little further reflection, she took the paper, carefully copied it, placed

the original in its envelope, returned it to the inner drawer, closed the main drawer, locked it and put the bunch of keys in her valise. When Mrs. Topliff came in, Mrs. Affleck was deeply absorbed in perusing some reports in which the name of Dr. Topliff was frequently and favorably mentioned.

"Back so soon?" said she, looking at her watch. "Four o'clock! My, how time does fly when one is pleasantly employed! I had no idea it was so late. How fresh and rosy you look, Mrs. Topliff! Your afternoon out has done you good. One would almost take you for a young girl in that handsome dress and bonnet."

"Thank you, Mrs. Affleck!" said Mrs. Topliff, with an effort to look embarrassed. "Did you get through with your work? No? Well, I am glad of it; for I want you to come to-morrow prepared to stay for dinner with me and the girls. They get in from the conservatory at about five, and we dine at half-past."

"I will be delighted! How kind of you, my dear Mrs. Topliff!"

The two women kissed at parting, the one elated over her important discovery, the other hastening to the mirror to examine more closely her dress and bonnet, with an occasional glance at her face.

Mrs. Affleck kept her promise to dine with Mrs. Topliff and her daughters the next evening. While she feasted upon the delicacies of the Topliff table, she did not fail to deal out in discreet measure, the sweetmeats of oily compliments and savory praise of which she seemed to have an inexhaustible supply. Mrs. Topliff and her daughters were immensely satis-

fied with themselves and greatly pleased with their charming guest.

"Mrs. Affleck," said Mrs. Topliff after dinner, "the girls are going out to an evening party and I will be delighted if you can spend the evening with me. We will have a good visit all to ourselves."

"That will be charming, Mrs. Topliff! I will lay aside all work and devote one evening to pleasure. How kind of you to mention it! It is seldom that I get such a treat as you are giving me."

Mrs. Affleck looked after the girls as they went away with their beaus, holding their dainty heads several inches higher than was their wont. She then turned to Mrs. Topliff, with tears in her voice as she said,

"You ought to be the happiest woman in the world with two such lovely daughters. I envy you, Mrs. Topliff, indeed I do!"

As the evening wore away, the two women became very confidential and talked over many little matters which need not be put into a book. The visitor finally turned the conversation to Dr. Topliff, his ability, attainments and prominence. In the course of their conversation, she incidentally remarked,

"I have heard a good deal since coming to town about the downfall of a young minister lately—what was the name——?"

"Armby?"

"Armby! That's it. It was too bad!"

"Yes, we all felt disgraced by the affair," said Mrs. Topliff.

"I am told that he is a very bright man."

"Some people thought so; but he was very much overrated."

"Do you think so, Mrs. Topliff?"

"Indeed I do!"

"One lady who spoke to me of him, said that he was a very able preacher—one of those natural-born orators."

"She must have been one of the unfortunate fellow's admirers. Who was she?"

"Really, I did not learn her name. She was in the parlor of the Millard House where I am stopping. I think she boards there. She had the appearance of an intelligent woman."

"Some people—the women especially—were very foolish over Armby until this thing came out. Many of them are not so enthusiastic now."

"Many women do act silly over a popular minister and too often put themselves in his way. I pity the minister who goes wrong; but he is often less to blame than we think."

"I do not pity him at all! He has no business to yield to temptation."

"That's so, Mrs. Topliff; but while the people are terribly down on the woman in this case, there is any amount of sympathy for the young minister. Everybody speaks in the highest terms of his ability as a preacher. One gentleman remarked in my hearing that he even compared favorably with Dr. Topliff himself. I thought that a very great compliment."

"Fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Mrs. Topliff. "I don't consider it very complimentary to Mr. Topliff. Have any of them told you that his church tried to get rid

of him so that they might have Mr. Topliff for their pastor?"

"No, I had not heard of that."

"Well, a petition was circulated asking for his removal. It was signed by many of his church, including some of the most prominent members of the managing board; but he refused to go. What do you think of that?"

"He certainly could not have been very sensitive; but I cannot bring myself to believe that he has been guilty of anything morally wrong. Do you think so, Mrs. Topliff?"

"Think so! Do you know that he was found undressed in the bed of a young woman whose reputation is none of the best? that he was intoxicated at the time? that there was a supply of wine in the room, some of the bottles being empty? and that all this was in a house run as a dressmaking establishment, but which was under the eye of the police? Why, Mrs. Affleck, he even had in his pocket a key to the woman's private room! There can be no possible doubt of his guilt."

"May there not be some mistake about the matter? You know mole-hills may be magnified into mountains, sometimes. Of course I know that you would not exaggerate anything; but your information may be at fault."

"Wasn't I present at the trial? I heard every word of the testimony."

"What explanation did Mr. Armby give of these damaging circumstances?"

"Why, he set up the flimsy pretext that he was

decoyed into a house and overpowered. And yet he has not been able to find the house!"

"Might there not have been some conspiracy to compromise the young preacher and then demand blackmail of him?"

"Conspiracy! He and his friends raised that cry; but it was only a pretext. The fact is, Mrs. Affleck, he had been suspected and thoroughly watched for months."

"This all seems incredible to me, Mrs. Topliff. It don't seem possible that——"

"Incredible or not incredible, I know it is true."

"Oh! If you know it is true, that is altogether different. I supposed you had simply heard these things."

"I had heard them; but from sources that were entirely reliable. The fact is, I knew beforehand that he was going to be arrested."

"Indeed, Mrs. Topliff, I am glad to have you tell me all this. From the little I had heard, I was somewhat prejudiced in favor of the young man. One never knows until he hears both sides. Did Dr. Topliff know that Mr. Armby was being watched and was about to be arrested?"

Mrs. Topliff hesitated a moment. At length she replied,

"What I tell you is in strictest confidence. It was from him that I knew all about the matter."

"Then your information is certainly reliable. Do you think Dr. Topliff knew when the arrest was going to be made?"

"If so, he did not tell me; though he told me he was going to be out of town, and said that if anything

special happened, not to tell anybody just where he was. From this I think he knew when the lightning would strike."

What more might have been said, had not the return of the Misses Topliff interrupted the conversation, it is impossible to tell.

"I must be going, Mrs. Topliff." Then to the girls, "I have had a most delightful visit with your mama while you were away. Did you have a pleasant evening? Yes? That is fine!"

After affectionately kissing Mrs. Topliff and her daughters, Mrs. Affleck took her leave. The next morning she was closeted with Colonel Blakeslee and Judge Truman in the latter's private office. The same afternoon Mrs. Topliff was grieved to receive the following note:

"MY DEAR MRS. TOPLIFF:

"I am greatly disappointed at receiving a letter from my house directing me to proceed at once to C——. One of our force was taken sick there and I am to complete the work she had commenced. When that is done, I expect to return to X—— and finish here.

"I greatly regret that I am unable to call and bid you and the girls good-bye. I thank you a thousand times for the many kindnesses you have shown me. With love, I am

"Yours,

"MRS. AFFLECK."

At the time when the discussion of the Armby case was at its highest, a little, old stoop-shouldered man glided into Judge Truman's office and asked to see the Judge. His swarthy face was covered over by a dirty

grizzled beard, while his one small black eye seemed all the keener by contrast with its artificial mate.

"Hello, Ike!" exclaimed Judge Truman as the man was shown into the private office. "What brings you here? I would as soon expect to see a terrapin crawl out of its shell as to see you out of your old rummage box on Dingy Lane."

"I stay there because more money comes to me than I can get outside of it. This is a case when I can get more out of my shell."

"I might have known it was money that lured you out. I don't think anything else could. I believe you can smell a penny a square away and see money with your glass eye where honest men cannot with two good ones."

"Money is power, Judge Truman, money is power!"

"I would like to know what power money has after it gets into your grasp. Nobody ever sees a penny of it again."

"Money has power to pull down from his high place a proud young preacher. It has power to concoct a scheme for his downfall and to furnish proof of his guilt. It has power to keep in the background the spider that weaves the web in which the fly is entangled. Perhaps it has the power also, to break the thread and let the fly go—possibly to scare the spider from his den."

"What do you mean?" demanded Judge Truman.

The wily old chemist did not fail to notice the intense interest shown in the lawyer's tone and manner, though he appeared to notice nothing unusual.

"To tell you what I mean would be to give away my secret; but I have come to sell it."

"You have come to sell the truth, have you? Look here, Isaac Meisser, why not do at least one generous act and tell what you know of this matter for truth's sake and help lift the black cloud from the life of that worthy young man?"

"As for selling the truth, did not this worthy young man preach the truth for pay? And what's the sense of telling what I know for nothing when I can get paid for it? Besides, what I have to say will help to lift the cloud just as much if I am paid, as it would if I did it for nothing."

"Well, how much do you want?"

"All I can get."

"But how am I to know that the information you claim to have is worth paying for?"

"You'll have to take my word for it. I will only tell you beforehand that I know of an important clew which if followed must lead to important discoveries. Nobody has that clew but myself—that is no one who would put you onto it for love or money."

Judge Truman sat in silence for a moment. At length he said,

"Ike, I know what sort of man I have to deal with; you know what sort of man you are trying to deal with. I have this proposition to make—that you meet me and one or two others here at ten o'clock tomorrow. You then tell us what you know, and I promise you that we will pay you all your information is worth."

"That would be to put myself in your hands, while now I have you in mine."

"I have told you what we will do. There is no use wasting any more words about it."

"I will take——"

"I don't care to know what you will take. It is what we think it is worth or nothing—take your choice. Will you be here at ten o'clock to-morrow, or not?"

The old miser, knowing that Judge Truman was not a man either to be cajoled or bullied, agreed to the arrangement and went his way.

The chemist was prompt to the hour and related the circumstance of having sold certain drugs and a supply of wine on the night before Armby's arrest.

"Would you know the men if you should see them?"

"When I get a square look at a face with this good eye of mine, I never forget it."

"Could you identify the bottles you sold to the men?"

"If every bottle were broken into a hundred pieces."

"Come with us," said Judge Truman.

It was but a short walk to the central police station, where the Chief of Police had his office.

"Did you keep the basket and its contents that were found in the room the night of Mr. Armby's arrest?"

"Certainly," said the Chief.

"We would like to see them, if you please."

The Chief conducted the party into the basement, the heavy door of which yielded to a massive key which he had taken from a drawer of his desk.

"Nobody ever gets into this room except myself or some one to whom I give the key. We have a regular museum—a veritable curiosity shop down here."

This he said as he led the way into a large room or underground hall, the floor of which was cement and every opening to which was guarded by heavy iron grates. Arranged along the walls were massive oaken cases, each designated by a number. Going to case No. 47, he selected from a large bundle of keys one bearing the same number.

"Here it is," said he as he opened the door and lifted out the basket, "just as it was on the day of the investigation."

The basket was taken over to a window where each bottle was carefully scrutinized by the chemist. He had been instructed before going to make no comments while in the presence of the Chief.

"We are greatly obliged to you," said Judge Truman when about to leave.

"Not in the least," replied the Chief.

"Let me speak a work to you privately," said the Judge.

He and the Chief went aside.

"You are aware," began the lawyer, "that we have claimed all along, that Armby is the victim of a conspiracy. We have already secured evidence which removes all doubt from my mind. I know how you people are. When you make an arrest, especially of some prominent person, you feel that your reputation is at stake, and bring to bear all the power of your police and detective force to make the charge stick. I warn you, Chief, that you are on the wrong track in

this case, and the sooner you begin to adjust your force to that fact, the better it will be for you."

"You don't think that I would ——"

"Come, Chief! You know that what I have said is true. I have given you this little tip confidentially. You can take it for what it is worth."

"To be frank with you, Judge, I have had my misgivings ever since the day of the trial. In nine cases out of ten, I can tell a guilty man when I see him on the witness stand on his own behalf. Armby did not act like a guilty man. The only thing that knocked me was that key business."

"See here, Chief, you know that could all be fixed up. It was a part of the plan and a mighty cunning part it was. I am glad you feel as you do about it, and feel sure you would not lend your department to injure a worthy man."

"That I wouldn't!"

"All I ask of you, Chief, is that you take the position the law takes. Every man is entitled to the verdict of innocence until he is proved guilty. Mr. Armby, therefore, is entitled to the protection of your force as an innocent man until he is declared guilty."

"You may depend upon me to that extent at least; and if there is anything more I can do to help you in clearing the matter up, I will gladly do it."

"Thank you!" said Judge Truman, with a warm handshake, "and it may be that I can do you some good one of these days."

With this the lawyer took leave of the Chief, saying within himself,

"Thank goodness, that gun is spiked!"

When the party had returned to the office, Truman's first words were,

"Well, Ike, what have you to say?"

"They thought they were devilish sharp when they took the labels off the bottles!"

"Did you identify them?"

The chemist took a bottle from an inside pocket.

"You didn't sneak that from the basket?"

"No! I fetched it from the store. It is exactly like the others. Hold it up between you and the window. See anything?"

"No—yes—I see 'I. M.' blown into the glass; but what does that amount to?"

"The people I buy of put up this wine in bottles having my initials. 'I. M.' means Isaac Meisser."

"But this does not signify that the bottles in the possession of the Chief of Police are the identical ones you sold that night."

"That is true; but if you can show that these two men bought exactly the number of bottles of me on the night before; that they bought at the same time two drugs which would have exactly the effects that the preacher swore to, and if these two men were witnesses against him the next day and then cleared out, don't you think it will amount to something?"

"You ought to have been a criminal lawyer, Ike, instead of a criminal chemist."

"I may be more of a lawyer than you think."

"Well, Ike, here is enough to pay you amply for all the trouble you have taken. It is paid with the understanding that if ever the case comes to trial you are to come forward and tell on oath all you know about this

matter. Hold! I guess I would better make sure of that. I will give you half now and half later on."

The old miser eagerly clutched the offered money, while he gazed with a covetous eye upon the balance.

"You said you would pay me what it was worth. This is not half——"

"But we were to be the judges. We will not be close-fisted about the matter, Ike. This is all we will pay you now. If things turn out all right we will treat you handsomely."

The chemist took the offered gold, thrust it into his pocket, jingled it on the way to his shop, went behind his screen, took out the shining pieces, held them in his two hands, gazed at them lovingly, rung them one by one on a small marble slab, put them into a bag, went to the door, looked up and down the street, went back behind the screen, opened a little trap-door in the floor, took out a small iron safe, placed the coins in the strong box, carefully locked it and tenderly lowered it into its place.

CHAPTER XXV

EDNA'S FLIGHT

MEANTIME more than a year had passed since the awful social thunderclap had startled the city of X—— and hurled Albert Armby from the high position he had occupied before the people. The time had now fully come, when his friends deemed his presence in the city of paramount importance. As Edna's good name was also involved, and since she had shown such rare courage and discretion through the whole trying ordeal, nothing was kept from her. When she learned that the general facts of the plot had been unearthed and that a messenger was to be dispatched for Armby, she was fairly beside herself with enthusiastic joy.

"Colonel Blakeslee," said she, "for reasons you well know, I have longed to do something towards Mr. Armby's vindication. Up to this time I have had to stand by and see others work, but have not been able to do anything myself. There is now something I can do, and I want to do it."

"What is it, Edna?" asked the Colonel.

She blushed to the roots of her hair as she answered,

"Go after Mr. Armby!"

"Go after Mr. Armby!" exclaimed the Colonel. "Impossible!"

"Why impossible?"

"The journey is long, much of it through wild mountainous country beset by Indians and what is worse, by bands of lawless white men who make their living by robbery. Every pack-train going out and every miner returning with gold has to be guarded. It would be rash even to madness for you to undertake such a journey."

"Now, Colonel," said Edna coaxingly, "you know I am neither a pack-train nor a miner returning with gold, and as to the Indians ——"

"If there were not an Indian nor a bandit in the country, it is out of the question for a little scrap of a woman like you to make such a trip. You must be crazy to think of such a thing."

"The smaller the better," replied Edna, "birds are smaller than I am yet they travel over worse country than that."

"But you have not quite developed your wings yet."

"True, but on the back of my trusty horse I can come as nearly flying as will be necessary for such a journey."

"But, Edna, you cannot be serious in your absurd proposal."

"I was never more serious in my life," said she. "The greater the danger the more I want to go. You know, Colonel, there are those in this city who have been so cruel as to insinuate that I had some part in the foul conspiracy to ruin Mr. Armby. I want to prove to him and to his friends that I am willing to risk my life to help restore him to his honored place among men."

Colonel Blakeslee looked at her a moment with undisguised admiration in his frank countenance.

"While nobody but a little madcap would think of such a thing," he at length said, "I cannot help admiring the motive that prompts you. Nevertheless, what you propose is out of the question, not only because of the dangers but for reasons of prudence."

This conversation took place at the Blakeslee home one evening late in the month of July.

The next morning Edna visited the stable where her horse was kept.

"Take him," said she to the proprietor, "to the horseshoer and have him shod all around with steel shoes considerably heavier than he usually wears."

Next she visited the public library.

"Have you a large map of the state?" she asked of one of the attendants. Being directed to a set of maps on the walls of the reading room, she scrutinized them closely but with little satisfaction. She sat down for a few moments, her face wearing a puzzled expression. Suddenly her countenance brightened. Then she arose and quickly left the building.

"Is this the office of the mining exchange?" asked Edna as she entered a large room on the ground floor of one of the principal office buildings.

"It is, madam. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I wish to see the president or some other officer," said she.

"Step this way, madam."

She was shown into the office of the secretary by whom she was received with marked courtesy. If

she had but known it, she would better have entered a serpent's den. After an extended interview in which Edna asked many questions respecting the Deep River country and the way thereto, the secretary rang for a messenger boy. While waiting for one to respond, he wrote a brief note and sealed it. When the boy came, the secretary met him in the outer office, and gave him his instructions. He then returned and pleasantly engaged Edna in further conversation.

At the expiration of about twenty minutes, a tall, sinewy, bronzed man appeared at the office door and was at once admitted by the secretary. The man wore the typical sombrero hat. His jacket-coat was drawn close about his waist by a leathern belt which, if he had been in the mountains, would have contained at least one six shooter, fifty rounds of ammunition and a savage dirk knife. His corduroy trousers were tucked into a pair of boot legs, which, but for their tendency to fall down about his ankles, might have come above his knees.

"Miss Lee, this is my friend Hazelwood. He can give you more information in a half hour than I could in a day."

Off came the sombrero, simultaneous with a profound bow which seemed to indicate that the man had but one joint in his body and that in the middle.

"You will excuse me, Miss Lee," said the secretary, "as I have some business to look after outside."

With this he left the little woman and the tall man in undisputed possession of the office and was himself soon closeted in very private conversation with the Hon. Jacob Sharply.

While Edna Lee could have taught the rough miner and mountaineer some useful lessons such as industrious young ladies acquire in halls of learning, he on his part was in position to impart to her many valuable pointers which she, just then, was most anxious to receive.

"I thank you most heartily," said Edna at the conclusion of their interview, and in token of her sincerity extended to him her little gloved hand and bestowed upon him a sweet smile of genuine gratitude. He gave the hand what he meant to be just the slightest pressure, though in fact it made her wince with pain.

With sombrero in hand, he stood at the office door and watched the bewitching little figure until it disappeared down the street.

"Gad!" said he, and turned back into the office, his great big heart all in a flutter.

The rest of the day Edna spent in her room with scissors, thread and needle, remodeling one of her riding habits. After dinner she paid a short visit to the rooms of the Little Woman in Black with whom she held a very earnest conversation. She also wrote a note and exacted a promise from the little woman that she would deliver it to Colonel Blakeslee at dinner time next evening and not before. She returned to her room, went to bed early, slept soundly and arose next morning as bright as a sunbeam and as merry as a lark.

"I am going riding into the country to-day, Evelyn," said Edna after breakfast. "I may go quite a distance. Do not be uneasy about me if I should not return until late."

At dinner that evening a servant handed Colonel Blakeslee an envelope. It was addressed to him in one of the most exquisite styles of penmanship ever written by the skilful fingers of a pretty, wilful little woman. He quickly recognized the handwriting and opened the envelope. Evelyn observed a vexed expression on his countenance while he in silence read,

"MY DEAR COLONEL BLAKESLEE:

"I know your great generous heart will forgive me! This is the first time I have gone contrary to your advice, and would not now were it not that I am controlled by an overpowering impulse. For more than one reason my course may seem indiscreet; but when one is actuated by the highest motives for the accomplishment of a noble purpose, she can well afford to bide her time for the vindication of her prudence.

"Have no fears for me as I have none for myself. I have given to all you have said the most careful and serious thought; but there is something which impels me to this undertaking and assures me that I shall succeed.

"Remember me lovingly to Evelyn and try not to think unkindly of

"Your faithful but disobedient servant,

"EDNA."

Colonel Blakeslee knit his brows as he read the letter; but one who had studied his face at the moment would have discerned that it wore a composite expression of about equal parts of anxiety and admiration. He handed the note to Evelyn whose face wore a puzzled look while she read it.

"I do not understand this, father," she said. "In what has she gone contrary to your advice? and for what does she ask your forgiveness? Has she gone away?"

"Yes; but she expects to return, though she may not."

"Where has she gone, father?" asked Evelyn in much anxiety.

"After Albert Armby!"

"After Albert Armby? Oh, father, why did you let her go?"

"Why do I let the wind blow or the birds fly through the air? She asked my consent. I told her that such a thing was not to be thought of; but she has gone just the same."

"Why not send some one after her, father? She should not be allowed to undertake so perilous a journey."

"Give her a day's start with that horse of hers and the Old Harry himself couldn't overtake her! No—the only thing to do now, is to wait until we hear from her. She knew that we were going to send for Armby in a few days. She wanted to go; and when a woman wills, she will."

For a distance of about sixty miles Edna's journey lay through the picturesque and fertile valley at the head of which the city of X—— was situated. The main road which traverses the length of the valley is broad, smooth and level. Here there is a long stretch through an open country; there it lies between rows of shade trees which seem to converge at the termination of the road in the far distance.

Edna began her journey in the early morning and made no pause save for an hour's rest at midday. Long before the sun had settled down behind the western mountains, she had reached the small village

from which the road she must travel led off into the mountains. From the information she had obtained respecting the roads and trails to be traversed, she well knew that she must not attempt to cross the mountain range until next day. She was directed to a small inn where she could obtain shelter and food for herself and horse.

Mine host of the inn, though well advanced in years, was a well-preserved little man, blessed with a good-natured face the lower zone of which was covered by a grizzly beard. From beneath his heavy brows shone two keen black eyes which seemed to possess the power and habit of reading as an open book the thoughts and motives of those he met. He was naturally of a trusting disposition; but the experiences of a long life spent among all kinds of people, had taught him to observe closely the conduct of strangers. He discovered the fine points or defects of a horse as quickly as he discerned the excellences and faults of his own species.

Without questioning the motive which prompted his fair guest, he knew that it was unusual for such a person as she to have come a long distance on horseback. What impressed him still more was that she should be traveling alone and inquiring the way through the mountains and seeking information concerning the wild and lawless country lying still farther to the south and west. It did not escape his notice that with her own hands she measured out the portion of grain for her horse; that she gave directions as to the amount of hay to be given him and remained until it was supplied; and that she waited until he had

under his feet an abundant bedding of straw before she seemed to take any thought respecting her own comfort. Nor had he failed to observe the intelligent demonstrations of affection of the horse for his little mistress, and the apparent ill nature he showed towards others who approached him when she was near.

There was a small corner room on the ground floor of the inn, on the door of which was tacked a piece of tin with the word "Office" painted upon it in black letters. After all the guests had retired, mine host sat in his round armchair, the sole occupant of this little room.

He was mentally discussing his guests—who they were, what their business, whither they were going and, to tell the whole truth, what their bills would amount to when they should come to settle in the morning. But his thoughts were mostly about the pretty little woman and the black horse.

"I would swear," he soliloquized, "that it is the same horse, only she never would have parted with him for all the gold in the mountains. It is not possible that she should have grown to be so pretty; and yet there is something which makes me think of her —the horse I reckon."

Meantime, Edna had retired early to seek much-needed rest. She was given a clean and comfortable bed, in a small room on the second floor rendered white and wholesome by recent calcimine.

There is a twilight between the time of being awake and falling asleep in which dreams are prone to disport themselves like children in the twilight of a summer evening. Unfortunately, amid the laughter, the

innocent prattle and noise of the children, there will sometimes be heard a discordant note of anger and contention. Likewise dreams, in the twilight of a night's sleep, are not all pleasant. Edna's last waking thoughts were about her horse, her journey, the noble errand upon which she was going; of Albert Armby, the pleasure she should have in finding him and the unspeakable joy of restoring him to his friends and to his rightful place in the confidence and esteem of his fellow-men. There was, it must be confessed, a pang as she thought that she was also going to bring him back to another. It was keen, but momentary. She thrust the unwelcome thought out of her mind.

"She is so true, so noble and has proven herself such a friend to me!" These waking thoughts gradually merged themselves into pleasant dreams as she was falling into a deep and restful sleep. Then, like a burst of angry oaths upon the innocent laughter of childhood, came the dream that she was being pursued by the tormentor of her life; that she was fleeing from him in a dark and deserted street; that with cruel cursings he was calling upon her to stop; that he was gaining upon her at every step; that his heavy hand was even then stretched out to clutch her and that his mouth was at her ear gloating over his triumph. She tried to cry out, but a heavy hand was laid over her mouth and she felt herself being smothered. Then she awoke with a start and found herself sitting upright trembling in violent agitation. Her dream was not all a dream; for she distinctly heard, near at hand, the dreaded voice of the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff.

She was at first so alarmed and confused that it required all the strength of her will to collect her thoughts and realize the true situation. She soon regained her self-control, when she perceived that the voice she heard proceeded from an adjoining room, connected with hers by a door which, however, was shut and locked. The head of her bed was against this door so she had but to keep still and listen, in order to hear the conversation which was going on between Topliff and some one else whose voice she did not recognize.

"I tell you, Topliff, there is something in the wind. I knew you were to be here to-night. Our spies reported that she left town early this morning headed in this direction; so I thought it best to follow. It has been the devil's own work a part of the time to keep her in sight. But as good luck would have it, the bird has alighted for the night and has folded her wings in this very house."

"But, Sharply, how did you come to follow her?"

"Because there have been some mysterious movements lately on the part of Blakeslee, the bird, the little old woman in black and a few of the fool men who have stood by Armby through thick and thin. And big Burly Bill whom we employed in that affair and of whom we thought we were rid when we got him off east, has just come back and is known to have been closeted with Blakeslee and his friends."

"Well, he could not give us away without incriminating himself."

"What the devil does he care about that? He'll do anything for a little money, as you well know. There

is but one of two things to be done with him, either to buy him up and send him away or—the other thing."

"Sharply, I have already put more money into this thing than the game is worth, and——"

"Very well, Topliff. The question, I warn you, is no longer what the game is worth, but what your reputation and even your liberty are worth. I suppose you are well aware that, if the truth ever comes out it means the penitentiary for you at least. I think I could save myself——"

"By abandoning me, I suppose."

"Come, Topliff, you and I must not quarrel. You know the old adage about what happens when thieves fall out. The fact is we have reached a point where the problem that confronts us is how to make the most we can out of a bad business."

"But you promised me that you would get Armby out of my way and——"

"Haven't I done it? But our present task is to keep him out of the way."

"I had no notion, Sharply, that you would go to such lengths as you have."

"Now see here, Topliff, you know damned well that no step was taken without your full knowledge and approval."

"Yes, I know it. But it seems that when one gets started in a nasty affair, every step leads from bad to worse; and now, just when we thought the matter had quieted down and we were to have some peace, the whole blasted business comes up anew and we are to have the miserable fight over again."

"All right, Topliff, if you say so, we will let matters take their course; but I promise that they bode no good to you, that's all."

"No, I did not mean anything of the kind, Sharply. Of course since we are in for it, what must be done must be, I suppose. But what do you want me to do?"

"Well, I have already hinted what should be done with Burly Bill."

"I don't think, Sharply, that it would do any good to buy him up and send him away. He would only come back to be bought up again. Besides that——"

"The other thing is cheaper, I suppose you would say; and you might add, dead men tell no tales."

"But who is to do it, Sharply?"

"It is an easy matter to hire it done."

"Well, that——"

"Would be expensive, you doubtless think; and you might add again that we would have the second man to deal with, and the third, and so on. You see there is no end to that sort of thing. There is a more effective way."

"What is it, Sharply?"

"Either the bludgeon in your hands or the dagger in mine."

After this declaration, there was a long pause. The matter seemed settled. The conversation was renewed by Sharply.

"But this does not dispose of the carrier pigeon, Topliff."

"What do you mean?"

"This bird that I have been following all day."

"Oh! What about her?"

"I think she is headed towards the Deep River country where Armby is said to be, and she must be stopped in her flight—that's all."

"How is that to be done?" asked Topliff.

"Since you leave me to do all the planning, I would suggest that either we clip her wings, or——"

"What do you mean by clipping her wings?"

"Nothing simpler. A little arsenic or a sharp knife will do the business. She goes out in the morning. Instead of finding that winged steed she calls her lover, she finds a worthless carcass."

"But you were about to suggest something else."

"A bird is on the wing with a message to its lover. A huntsman happens to spy her on the way. Up goes his fowling-piece, down comes the bird. Do you understand?"

He understood! At the same time the passage of scripture which he had so often, and with so little sincerity, quoted, came to his mind: "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? Not one of them falleth to the ground without your Heavenly Father's notice!" And this villain, who had followed this persecuted girl as the bloodhound pursues its prey, felt that he had been fighting a destiny which, though unseen and silent, is unerring in its movements and inexorable in the hour of its final triumph. And yet he felt that he could no more draw back than one can resist the current, who has placed himself in the rapids above Niagara.

CHAPTER XXVI

ESCAPE OF THE BIRD

EDNA did not wait to hear more. She arose, quickly dressed herself, stole noiselessly down the stairs and startled the old landlord out of his reverie by a nervous rap at his office door.

"What is wrong, Miss——"

"Nothing is wrong so far as your house is concerned. But as you are an honest man, and value human life, speak low!"

"What in the world has happened? You look as pale as if you had seen a ghost."

"I beg of you to ask me no questions. I must resume my journey at once."

"What! Through the mountains to-night? None but the most experienced guide would dare to attempt that trip at night even on the back of a broncho accustomed to mountain travel. There are places where the trail winds around the mountainsides above chasms a thousand feet deep and where a single misstep would mean instant death to both horse and rider. Resume your journey? Impossible!"

"Listen to me," replied Edna. "My own life and that of my horse are in more peril here than they could be in the midst of the dangers you describe. Not only my own life, but the lives of others are in peril. My horse has carried me to mountain heights where

no other horse would even attempt to go. I have not read your face aright if I cannot implicitly rely upon your help in such an hour, especially when I am risking everything to vindicate the honor of a good man and bring a gang of desperate criminals to justice. I wish I could explain all to you, but cannot now. I only ask you to get my horse ready as quickly as possible and find me a guide upon whom I can fully rely."

"There is but one such guide in this town, Miss."

"And where is he?"

"Here," said he, pointing to himself. "I have traveled that trail a thousand times in the last six years, and think I could follow it with my eyes shut. And in such a case as you describe, I am at your service."

"Good! Good!" exclaimed Edna, and prompted by her impulsive gratitude, she threw her arms about his neck and kissed his cheek as a child would kiss the cheek of her father.

In less than thirty minutes she was on the back of her faithful steed, and guided by the innkeeper astride of a wiry broncho, was beyond the limits of the village, headed towards a mountain pass but a few miles away. She caressed the mane of her horse, stroked his neck with her hand, saying,

"A little arsenic or a sharp knife for my winged steed! I would rather it should be the bird to fall! But the cruel hunter will need to be out early to get a shot at the bird!"

The road, until it entered the canyon and for some distance into the mountains, was an ordinary wagon road used by the inhabitants of the valley in bringing

down wood and stone. Edna and her guide rode for some distance side by side in silence. But it was not in the nature of things that a kind-hearted old landlord, who also pursued the more romantic calling of guide to strangers traveling over the dangerous Jaguar Pass, should ride very long in silence beside a pretty little woman who had shown such remarkable courage and decision of character. On her part, Edna felt in duty bound to impart so much of her confidence as he might wish to share, especially as she instinctively felt that he was a man in whose hands she might safely intrust her life.

"I do not want you," he said at length, "to tell me anything you would rather keep to yourself; but I cannot help wondering what caused you to change your mind after having retired for the night."

"I feel," replied Edna, "that you are entitled to an explanation of this seemingly strange conduct. What I am about to tell you is in strictest confidence for the present. We hope to make the matter public before long; but publicity just now might defeat our aims and enable some very bad men to escape merited punishment."

"You must not feel under obligation to tell me anything you prefer to keep secret. I have no wish to pry into affairs that do not concern me."

"Well, you are rendering me a service I can never repay; and I think it best that you should know something about me and my difficult task."

She then gave an account of the accusations and apparently overwhelming proof against Mr. Armby, and of his self-banishment until the dark mystery should

be solved or until his presence should be needed to aid in clearing it up.

"We have at last obtained convincing evidence that what we have all the time believed, is true—that Mr. Armby's disgrace was brought about by a cruel conspiracy. As I was used by the conspirators to effect his ruin, I insisted that I should be the one to bring him back to his friends and restore to him his good name."

"So you are the Edna Lee of whom I have read so much in the newspaper accounts of that affair. Well, this is a real surprise! I am all the more willing to help you. However this does not explain your haste. You could just as well have waited until morning and then gone on your way."

In reply she related to him the conversation she had overheard in the room adjoining hers.

"You astound me! Such a thing seems impossible. I knew Topliff back in the east more than twenty years ago. While he gave me some reason then to lose respect for him as a Christian minister, I never thought of his being guilty of such deviltry. I do not know what man could have been with him in the room."

"His name is Sharply. I heard Topliff speak it several times. Of course I know of him and have seen him many times, though I have never met him."

"How long have you lived in X——?"

"A little more than two years, though it seems to me an age. For nearly four years previously, my life had been so happy and full of hope; but the last year has been a veritable 'inferno' to me."

"Your people live in X——?"

"I have no people—none at least that I know of. My earliest recollections are of country life in Ohio where I lived until I was sixteen years old with a family by the name of Potter. For a long time I thought Mr. and Mrs. Potter were my parents until I overheard them talking about me one day. From their conversation, I learned that I was not their own child but had been adopted by them from some orphan asylum. I got into a quarrel with Mr. Potter about this horse. He gave the horse to me because it was, as he said, 'an unruly devil.' Afterwards he sold him without my consent. On the night before the horse was to be taken away, I took him myself and rode all night. The next morning I came to where a man and his wife had encamped over night. They were on their way to the far west. I told them the honest truth about myself. I told them also that I wanted to get just as far away from the scenes of my childhood as possible. They believed me, seemed to sympathize with me and told me that I was welcome to travel with them."

"I should be glad to have you tell me about your trip west, Miss Lee."

"It was a long, long journey across the states of Indiana and Illinois, across the great Mississippi River —sometimes through thickly settled communities, through great cities which were such wonders to me, and then into the more thinly populated sections of the west and across vast stretches of barren wastes. Finally we began to catch glimpses of the great mountain ranges—the first I had ever seen. Then the land

began to be more fertile and the country more thickly settled until at length we approached the city of C—— and stopped for the night in the edge of the town."

"Was that the end of your journey?"

"Yes, of mine, but not of my friends'. But a short distance from where we camped, was a slendid dwelling surrounded by ample grounds and fine improvements. It was about the middle of the afternoon; but as we had started early in the morning and come a long distance, we thought best to go into camp early. I had turned my horse loose that he might nip the grass near the roadside. We had not been there long when a well-dressed, intelligent gentleman in middle life came driving by in a light buggy. The man took a fancy to my horse and wanted to purchase him; but I rather rudely told him that he didn't have money enough to buy him.

"The same evening, the gentleman returned accompanied by his wife, who was dressed in deep mourning. She had such a sweet, sorrowful face that I was in love with her at once. 'I thought your horse such a beauty,' said the man, 'that I wanted my wife to see him.' I could not help noticing that while he was admiring the horse, with an occasional glance at me and then at his wife, she was paying little attention to the horse, but was eyeing me closely. They went away in about half an hour and we noticed that they returned to the handsome residence near by.

"The next day being the Sabbath, we remained quietly in camp. In the afternoon, the man and his wife came again and offered to take me to their home and treat me as they would their own child. Through

the advice of Mr. and Mrs. Hartman, I accepted the offer. Monday morning I took a sorrowful leave of my dear good friends who went on their way while I went to make my home with Mr. and Mrs. Thornton."

"I hope you found your new home a pleasant one."

"They could not have been better to their own daughter than they were to me. For four years, all that wealth and affection could do was done for me. Especial attention was given to my schooling, while I was surrounded with the best and most intelligent people of C——."

"Did Mr. and Mrs. Thornton come to X—— with you?"

"No. Nearly three years ago they met with ruinous reverses of fortune and were left without even a home of their own in which to live. I could not endure the thought of being a burden to them. In the hope of helping them while earning my own living, I resolved to push out for myself. Coming to X——, I prospered far beyond my expectations until I became involved in the maelstrom that swept Mr. Armby to ruin."

If Edna could have seen the face of her guide as she related to him her story, she would have observed a strange light come into his eyes as he gazed at her in the darkness like one who is seeking to recognize an almost forgotten face. The guide said nothing for a while. At length he said,

"I thank you, Miss Lee, for your confidence, and will gladly do all in my power to help you."

Meantime Edna and her guide had entered the canyon that formed a part of the mountain pass over which they were to travel. Through this canyon a

noisy little mountain stream rushed on its way to the valley from which they had just come. The road crossed and recrossed this stream many times within the distance of a few miles. The mountains rose on either side in almost perpendicular walls of massive stone to such a height that they seemed to support the star-bedecked ceiling of blue above. The road had dwindled into a narrow mountain trail in which they traveled single file, the guide trusting to the sagacity and superior vision of his sturdy broncho. Thus they rode in silence for some time when the guide paused and said,

"Here we must take leave of our little torrent which has kept us such noisy company thus far, and begin the really difficult part of our trip."

Accordingly they turned off to the right and followed for some distance a gulch which seemed to terminate in the very blackness of darkness between two ragged and desolate mountain peaks. They had been gradually ascending all the way up the canyon stream; but now the way became much steeper and more broken. After following the gulch for a distance of two or three miles, they struck off abruptly to the left along the ridge which connected the two mountains. Still their pathway was steep and in places very difficult. Now the trail was winding along the side of a mountain, many hundred feet above its base. The tops of the pine trees which grew to great height, were below, while the crags of the mountains loomed up against the sky above. Edna gazed down into the sinister depths of the forests and wondered what savage beasts might be prowling amid its gloomy solitude. Only a few

straggling and stunted trees stood along their path now, like shivering sentinels in the rocky waste. Not a word had been uttered for two hours, except some encouragement spoken to the horses as they picked their way along the difficult path. Finally the guide stopped.

"We have come now," he said, "to the most difficult and dangerous part of our journey, and before proceeding further, we will give our horses a little breathing spell." So saying he alighted from his broncho and assisted Edna to dismount. Taking a flask and some rolls from a pouch attached to his saddle, he added, "Mountain travel always gives me a ravenous appetite. My wife made us up a lunch of some rolls, which I think are the whitest and best in the world. She put into the heart of each a lump of butter and laid in a slice of venison from a young doe which I killed the day before yesterday, and dressed to my liking. This wine is home-made. We have kept it in our cellar for the last five years. If this will not tempt your appetite, I don't know what would."

"Your wife was very thoughtful indeed. My appetite needs no tempting, but if it did, I am sure your bill of fare would be irresistible."

After Edna and the guide had partaken of the lunch which had been so thoughtfully provided, he sat in silence a moment as if debating some question with himself. At length he said,

"You spoke of falling in with some people coming out west. Can you describe the man?"

"He was about your height, though much younger.

His face was smooth shaven, his complexion rather dark and his hair black with just a sprinkle of gray."

"Was his wagon a prairie schooner? and did he drive a team of horses, one a gray and the other a sorrel?"

"Yes, sir," answered Edna in some surprise.

"When the man wanted to buy your horse, didn't he offer you five hundred dollars for him? and didn't you caress the horse's ears and kiss his nose and tell him that you wouldn't let the man have him for his old buggy full of gold?"

"Tell me," Edna exclaimed, "did you know Mr. Hartman and his wife?"

"If they are the people I am thinking about, I believe I knew them slightly. But permit me to ask another question or two. When you refused to sell the horse, did the man throw to you a gold eagle? and did you throw it back into the buggy?"

"Did Mr. Hartman tell you about it?" asked Edna.

"Before you finally accepted the offer of the Thorntons, did Mrs. Hartman have a long and serious talk with you and tell you that for some reasons she might never be able to explain she wanted you to take the name of Edna Lee? Is not the name 'Edna' tattooed in blue on your left arm? and is it not for that reason that you discarded the name Nettie for your present name?"

Edna imagined that she was not at all superstitious, while she held all fortune-tellers in supreme contempt. But she felt a strange tremor creep over her as this gray-bearded man, near the hour of midnight, seated on a stone in the midst of the weird solitude of the

mountains, told her of things which only a soothsayer could have known.

"Tell me," she cried, "how you know these things to be true!"

"One other question," quietly said the guide. "Was not the first name of Hartman Caleb and that of his wife Mary?"

"Yes! yes!" exclaimed Edna, "but for heaven's sake tell me how you know these things!"

"Six years, Edna," replied the guide in softened tones, make a great difference in the appearance of a man of my age, especially when he lets his whiskers grow. I am Caleb Hartman!"

The truth began to dawn upon Edna when he called her by her first name; and by the time he had told her who he was, she had her arms about his neck and was crying for joy.

"Surely God is good to me!" exclaimed Edna, "in giving me friends in my hours of greatest need. Why did you not tell me sooner? O my dear old friend!"

"There! there!" said Hartman, "if you don't look out, you will set these old eyes of mine to leaking. I thought I knew that horse when I first saw him; but I didn't know you."

"And there was something about you, my dear old papa, that won my confidence when you came out to meet me at the inn. But those naughty old whiskers!"

"There has been even a greater change in you, Edna. I could never have believed that the angular, awkward, freckled-faced Nettie Potter would develop into the

pretty, plump little Edna Lee. It is the old story of the worm and the butterfly."

"How I wish I had known! Wouldn't I have hugged my dear mother Hartman! Tell me about her! I believe I would have known her."

"I think so too. She has not changed much. She was not feeling very well to-day and has kept pretty close to her room. But you will stop with us on your return and have a good visit with her."

"That I will! O, this is almost too good to be real! I wonder if it isn't all a dream!"

"Well, dream or no dream, we must be on our way. Half the night is gone, while the worst of our road is yet before us."

They again mounted their horses and were ready to resume their journey.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ABYSS

BEFORE starting, Mr. Hartman took up a trumpet which was looped to the horn of his saddle.

"This is hardly necessary," said he, "but to make sure I will give the signal."

He then blew a blast which startled Edna's horse and caused him to prance about in the path as much as there was room for such maneuvers. There followed a few seconds of silence, and then, as if out of the forest below, from every mountain crag, from behind every jutting rock and from the mountainsides across the chasm, trumpet answered to trumpet, echoed and reëchoed the blast until it seemed that ten thousand trumpeteers had answered the call of the mountain guide. At length the last reverberation died in the distance and silence again held sway. The guide listened intently for a few moments and then said,

"The way is clear and we may proceed."

They had gone but a short distance when the guide again stopped, saying,

"Remain here for a little while until I return."

He rode forward a few rods when it appeared to Edna that his broncho was climbing right up the face of a perpendicular rock. After some moments he

seemed to reach the top of the rock, and then was lost to sight.

The guide soon reappeared on foot, descended the side of the rock and returned to Edna.

"I thought it best," said he, "to go up first and come back and assist you."

Edna soon saw the wisdom of this precaution; for not only was the ascent very steep, but the path veered to the right around a great rock, ascended between it and the face of the mountain and gained the top at a point where there was barely room for the horse to pass around a sharp edge which projected from the mountainside, while a chasm a thousand feet deep yawned beneath. When they had safely passed this perilous place, Mr. Hartman said,

"Now, you are certain that your horse is absolutely sure-footed, are you?"

"I have ridden him ever since he was a colt in the pasture, on every conceivable sort of road and where there was no road at all, but have never known him to lose his footing for an instant."

"In that case it is better for you to remain on his back, for he will be less liable to stumble than yourself. The next three-quarters of a mile the trail is such that if either of you should make a false step, you would be mangled to death on the rocks at the bottom of the canyon. Fortunately, the moon is now in our favor. While it has been shining all night, it has not helped us very much while we were further down; but now we are up high enough so that we get its full benefit. Keep pretty close to me and watch for any sign I may make."

This was a shrewd ruse on his part to keep Edna from looking down; for the trail followed a ledge around the mountainside—a perpendicular face of a thousand feet above them and more than a thousand feet below. On this ledge there was barely room for a horse to step. Nearly every foot of the way, Edna could have stretched out her hand and touched the wall of the mountain on her right, while her foot in the stirrup projected over the brink on the other side. Her faithful horse seemed to realize the danger. Never did he pick his footing with greater care. Edna understood now the meaning of the trumpet blast; for while it would have been difficult for two footmen to pass each other there, it would have been utterly impossible for two horses to pass. While she obeyed the instructions of the guide and watched him closely every instant, she could not help seeing that they were in great peril. The guide had no concern for himself, as he knew every inch of the way and could have traveled it blindfolded; but his heart stood still with fear lest the feet that had never traveled the trail before might make a fatal step.

But they were surer than he knew. When Edna, upon the back of her trusted steed, had gone into mountain fastnesses and up to mountain heights in reckless disregard of the danger she incurred, she knew not why she did it, except that the very risk she ran and the wild ruggedness of the scenery appealed to a spirit within her which reveled in the terrific moods of nature out of which the weird and defiant mountain formations seemed to have sprung. When she had gained one height, it was only to discover an-

other from which she thought to obtain a better view of the wilderness of mountain crags and the intervening chasms.

Her type of mind had not led her to think that every experience and every attainment of life prepares for and leads up to the crowning achievement of existence. Therefore she did not know that for the last seven years—nay, from the day she was born, she was in preparation for this night's work, upon the issues of which life and destiny depended. Nor had it occurred to her that providence, which is to say destiny, had put into her hands a servant, which, while not human, was more to be trusted than if he had been, and without which she would not have been able to accomplish her task. Nor did she understand that destiny never yet put any task before a human being without placing in his hands, as he had need of them, the necessary means for accomplishing that task.

As it was, she enjoyed the weird novelty and the danger of the journey over the most dangerous mountain pass in all the western country, made all the more weird and dangerous by the hour of midnight.

At last our travelers came out upon a large shelf of rock which projected some twenty feet over the chasm.

"Thank God!" said the guide with a breath of relief, "the worst is over."

"If I had known of that place," replied Edna, "I should have been over it a dozen times before now."

"Perhaps," said he, "but it would not have been in the middle of the night."

"That is true. And I now see how impossible it would have been for me to make the trip without your aid. But what noise is that I hear? It sounds like the distant roar of the wind."

"It is the little stream we left several hours ago. We are nearly two thousand feet above it now. The rock upon which we stand is about six thousand feet higher than the room you occupied in my house last evening, and between ten and eleven thousand feet above the level of the sea. About one mile further on is a small lake nestled among the mountain peaks. That lake is the source of this little mountain stream, also of another which flows in the opposite direction. Both streams are supplied by the same lake, yet the waters of one flow into the Atlantic, those of the other into the Pacific. But a short distance from here is a point—the very summit of the divide—where a drop of rain or a flake of snow deflected by a breath of wind one way or the other in falling, may have its destination changed by the width of the continent."

By this time their horses were rested again. The guide struck a match, looked at his watch and added—

"We must be on our way. It is now nearly morning and I want to reach the little valley at the foot of the trail before any of the people are astir."

"Are there many people in the valley?"

"About a half dozen families."

As they continued their journey, Edna reflected upon what Mr. Hartman had said about the lake, the drop of rain, the flake of snow and the two streams.

"How like human destiny," thought she. "How small a thing sometimes determines the fate of a human being—but a word of encouragement or blame, a breath of confidence or suspicion!"

The descent was much shorter and easier than the ascent had been; but an apparently trivial incident soon occurred which promised most serious consequences. The first tints of gray which tell of approaching dawn had appeared against the sky, when Edna called to her guide and asked,

"What is that dark object moving along the mountainside up yonder?"

Mr. Hartman stopped, and after watching the object a moment said,

"That is a bear which has been prowling about the neighborhood in the valley and is now sneaking back to his den. Are you afraid of him?"

"N-o, not exactly; though if I were alone, I think I should feel rather uncomfortable."

"Well, the probabilities are that he is much more afraid of you than you are of him. Just watch him!"

Putting his hands to his mouth, he uttered a noise resembling a cross between a shrill whistle and a yell. The bear, nearly frightened out of his wits, scampered off around the mountain, cutting a ludicrous figure in his clumsy haste to escape. Edna laughed heartily at Bruin, but the bear had his revenge. In his awkward scramble, he loosened a multitude of small stones which came rattling down the mountain in a perfect shower. One of the stones struck with great force the right hind foot of Edna's horse. He leaped for-

ward in the path and went hobbling on three legs for several rods before he could be brought to a standstill. Edna was off his back in an instant, caressing his wounded foot and talking to him as if he had been an injured child. Hartman was by her side in a moment, carefully examining the wounded member.

"I hope," said he, "that it is not seriously hurt. If it had struck a few inches higher up, it would have snapped his slender leg as it would a pipe-stem. As it is, there is quite a gash just at the upper edge of his hoof which is bleeding freely. Confound that bear! or rather confound myself! I had no business to frighten the fool."

Edna had no doubt but what she would be followed by some emissary of Topliff and Sharply; but so long as her horse was all right, she had no fear. She knew that by making the mountain pass by night, she would have gained so much the start of her pursuers that it would be impossible for them to overtake her.

"Let us make haste," continued Hartman. "There is a man in the little settlement who is a skilled farrier as well as something of a horse-doctor. He is an old friend of mine and can be fully trusted. You must ride the rest of the way on my broncho and I will lead your horse."

"You have no need to lead him—he will follow me anywhere."

The sun was tinting the mountain peaks with gold, when they reached the small valley in which the mountain pass terminated; but not a soul was astir. The valley was only about half a mile wide and two or three miles long. Its population consisted of a few

families who lived in log cabins and gained a livelihood by cultivating each a small patch of the fertile soil, and by hunting in the neighboring forests.

The cabin towards which Mr. Hartman headed was nestled up against the mountain on the farther side of the valley and was nearly twice the size of any other in the village. Besides this, there were ample stables for his horses and other stock. Our travelers did not stop until they were behind the stables sheltered from the gaze of any one else who might be abroad. Hartman then went to the cabin door and rapped sharply with his knuckles. In answer to his summons, the door was opened and the tousled head of a middle aged man whose face appeared never to have seen a razor, made its appearance.

"Caleb Hartman, 'pon my soul! Where on earth did yer come frum? No! You don't tell me thet yer come over the trail in the night? Well, ther's not 'nuther man livin' who'd dare to try it. Woman? Whew! Yes, I'll be out in a minit."

It was not much more than a minute before he made his appearance, bare-headed and without coat or vest. His toilet was simple. All he had done was to glide into his trousers and pull on a pair of old boots. Simultaneously with his appearance, the blue smoke began to curl up from the chimney of the cabin.

"This is my friend, Mr. Harris, Miss Lee."

Harris greeted her awkwardly enough, but there was a sincerity in his hearty handshake and in his frankness of face and manners that won her confidence at once.

"Go into the house, Miss Lee. Wife has started a

fire and 'll make you comfortable. We'll look arter the hosses."

"Not until you have examined my horse's foot and told me how badly it is injured."

"Foot hurt? Well, yer may thank yer stars thet his neck ain't broke and yourn too."

This he said while examining carefully the wounded foot.

"Tain't bad. Cut an' bruised. Nuthin' ser'us. Would be though ef he had to travel much. A week's rest an' some simple treatment 'll bring him out all right."

"A week? Good heavens! You don't mean that he cannot travel for a week?"

"Yes'm. There'll be some inflamashun, which'd be much agrawated by travel. To put 'im on the road in less than a week would ruin 'im, an' it's seldom you see such a piece o' horseflesh."

Edna turned away to hide the tears she was struggling hard to restrain. Then she said to Hartman,

"Tell him all about it and plan for me the best that can be done."

She went into the house and left the two men together.

Mrs. Harris soon had on the table a wholesome breakfast to which Mr. Hartman did ample justice, but Edna's appetite had been destroyed by the unwelcome information concerning her horse. After breakfast, she was taken by the motherly Mrs. Harris into a small bedroom and tucked away in a clean and comfortable bed. The room was then darkened and Edna was left alone. The struggle was strong between her anxious

thoughts and her need of rest. Anxiety finally yielded, sleep assumed its rightful sway and Edna, wearied by her arduous ride, slept soundly until noon.

While she slept the two men laid their heads together and made their plans.

"How'd it do, Hartman, fer Miss Lee to take my Jim horses an' leave hern here till she gits back? The black horses 'ill be all right by thet time."

"Just as well try to separate her from her shadow as to get her to leave her horse. Besides that, if they follow her they would be almost sure to overtake her. But if she remains quietly here for a week, they will give up the chase and conclude that she did not come this way. Meanwhile her horse will recover from his injury and she can start out bright and early some morning and no one in the valley will be any the wiser."

When Edna arose she was informed of the plan decided upon. She saw the wisdom of it and acquiesced, though with no little vexation at the delay.

When it began to grow dark, Hartman took his leave of Edna and started on his return to Canyon Village. Before going, he gave her some fatherly advice.

"One would as well," said he, "preach silence to that little mountain torrent as to preach patience to you unless you have greatly changed in temper as well as in appearance; but I must warn you to be governed by the advice of Mr. Harris."

"I have learned many valuable lessons, papa Hartman," replied Edna, "since we parted in C——, and it may be that patience is one of them. You may rest

assured that I shall do nothing without first taking counsel of Mr. Harris."

"You may have learned to be patient, but I am not so sure about prudence. However, I do not chide you, nor would I discourage you. I only wish you Godspeed and shall wait anxiously for your return."

CHAPTER XXVIII

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

LATE on the night when Edna and Caleb Hartman left the inn for their night ride through the mountains, the bosom friend and confidant of the Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff stole from the inn and made his way to the outskirts of the village, where he gave a peculiar knock at the door of a rickety old shanty which stood more than half concealed behind a clump of stunted pine trees. The signal was understood within, for the door was opened as to one who had been long expected.

"You hev come at last. Well, what news?"

"The bird has found its nest for the night in the inn of old Hartman. Topliff is there as I expected. The d—d old bag of blubber has no more backbone than a jellyfish. So long as there is no danger and everything can be done in the dark, he will strut about with as much gusto as a turkey gobbler and as much vanity as a peacock. But now that the outlook begins to grow a little dubious and the time has come when radical measures must be employed, he whines and cringes like a big fat hound that has been caught in the act of killing sheep. It is 'Sharply, you do this and Sharply, you do that,' and all I can get out of him is a little money, and d—d little at that."

"Yes, one of them fellers thet wants yer to do all

the work an' take all the risk an' he gulp down the profits. What's the progrum, Mr. Sharply?"

"This bird must be stopped in her flight, and stopped where she is," replied the lawyer.

"Thet's easy enough. All you've got to do is to tell me wher she is and how to git at her. A twist o' the neck or a crack on the head, an' the thing is done."

"You are too infernal ready for that kind of work, Jack. If you don't be more careful you will get your neck twisted out of joint at the end of a rope some of these days."

"What the devil do I care? As well thet way as any other. I tell you w'at I think, Sharply, ef thet Topliff could save his own neck by givin' us away, there might be a pair of us at the neck twistin,' eh?"

"I have thought of the same thing, Jack; but by the eternal gods, if ever he peaches on me there will be a meeting of two devils soon thereafter and I won't be one of them either."

"Wenever thet becomes nec'sary, Sharply, give me the job. I'm us' to it you know—and besides, I'd rather like the fun."

"One thing at a time, Jack. Let us attend to this bird first."

"Well wat's yer progrum?"

"Clip her wings first and if that won't do, then wring her neck."

"Don't speak to me in no proverbs. I know what ye mean by wringin' the neck, but clippin' wings is suthin' new to me."

"Very well. That horse of hers out of the way, her

means of flight are gone. I think you know now what I mean by clipping her wings. I have here a little package of stuff which put in his oats will settle the business with him."

"D—n yer stuff! I ain't up to thet sort o' business. At long range this"—here he laid his hand upon a wicked looking rifle at his side—"and at close range this,"—and he drew from his belt what appeared to be a buck horn knife handle about six inches long, but at the touch of a spring a long sharp blade glistened in the dim light with so vicious and sinister an appearance that it made even the cold blood of Jacob Sharply run colder still.

"One rip with this an' he's wuth no mor'n he'll bring fer crowbait."

"Well, just as you choose, Jack; I don't care how you do it, just so it is done quickly and effectively."

"Stay," said Jack, "wat's the matter with me flyin' with Blackwing myself? He'd be a dandy. All I've got to do, is to git over the range an' then he could be passed frum one to 'nuther of my pals so thet he could no more be found then ye kin find the little black ball under the shell, see?"

"Do as you please, but go at once and I will wait here till you return and report what has been done."

The criminal arose, slipped into his belt a savage looking revolver, pulled his slouched hat down over his eyes, as was his custom by day or night, and glided out into the darkness, leaving his more erudite but not less criminal confederate to await his return. He strode fearlessly to the Hartman inn. After looking cautiously around and satisfying himself that all was

quiet indoors, he entered the barn-yard and tried the door of the stables. Finding it securely fastened by a stout padlock, he looked about the yard in search of something with which to pry off the lock. He pulled a picket from a fence dividing the barn-yard from the little garden connected with the inn, and broke it thrice in vain attempts to break the fastenings of the door.

"Well," said he, "this settles the matter o' gittin' away with the horse; but I kin do t'other thing; for ef I can't git the horse out, I'm d—d ef I can't find some way of gittin' in!"

Upon examining the building more closely, he found some square holes that had been made at each stall for the purpose of furnishing ventilation. But these were not large enough to admit the body of a man. He pulled off another picket and by thrusting it into a crack between the boards, succeeded in prying one loose and thereby enlarging the opening so as to gain entrance to the barn. He heard a horse maunching at his hay, and upon investigation, found that this was the only horse in the barn, therefore he could make no mistake. He spoke to the horse, but it seemed to pay no attention to him but went on demurely stowing away the provender. He then laid his hand upon the horse. Still it seemed to pay no heed. The visitor ran his left hand down the leg until a certain point was reached, and then gave two quick and skilful cuts with his keen knife. The horse, with a groan lunged forward in his stall. The criminal picked up a wisp of hay, wiped his knife, closed it deliberately, left the stable as he came, returned to the shanty and found

Mr. Sharply waiting for him with well-nigh exhausted patience.

"I had begun to think you had taken the horse and gone with him. What the devil has kept you so long?"

"Thet old fool of a Hartman hez a lock on the barn door thet it would take a crowbar to break. Ez I couldn't git the horse out, I had to git in as best I could and do the other thing, clip the wings ez yer said."

"You did it then?" asked Sharply.

"I'll bet she'll be glad to trade fer old Hartman's broncho thet sleeps out in the pastur. The wings are clipped, an' no mistake."

"That's well. Here is the money agreed upon. We'll lay low in the morning and watch developments."

It was one o'clock when Sharply laid his head upon his pillow. Thinking little of what had been done, and having no compunctions of conscience, he soon fell into a sound sleep from which he awoke at six o'clock in the morning amply refreshed. From his window he had a full view of the Hartman inn and its barn-yard.

"She must be in no hurry or she would have been off by this time or rather she would have found out that—there goes the hostler! There will soon be the devil of a flurry about the old tavern now. Ha! ha!"

The Hon. Jacob Sharply actually treated himself to a chuckling laugh. He was not mistaken. The hostler went whistling to the barn door, thrust the key into the lock, then looked down to the ground without turning the key, stooped down and picked up

some pieces of picket, looked at the garden fence, went over and examined it, looked all around him, went back to the door, turned the key and entered the barn. In two or three minutes he emerged again and returned to the house with a celerity entirely new to that important functionary. Soon the Rev. Augustus Topliff hurried from the inn bare-headed and with toilet incompletely made—his long coarse hair uncombed and hanging over the sides of his face. In this rather undignified dishabille, he waddled between a walk and a trot to the stable. He soon reappeared and, without waiting to complete his toilet, made straight for the house where Sharply was stopping. Sharply knew that something was wrong, and hastening down, met him midway as he was coming diagonally across a large vacant lot. Topliff did not wait for an inquiry, but, half crying with rage, burst out,

"It is your fault; you alone are to blame! But for your advice it wouldn't have happened. He is ruined, he is ruined and it is all your fault!"

Sharply looked around hurriedly; for any one listening could have heard the big preacher at least half a block away.

"For God's sake, or the devil's, Topliff, don't talk so loud. Are you gone mad? What in hell's the matter?"

"Matter? Why you have gone and ruined my horse. He's ham-strung, and the black horse is gone!"

"Come, Topliff, let's go back to your room. You are not more than half dressed. This is indeed a bad matter, but you are making it a blamed sight worse

by your appearance and your excitement. Hold, I will not go with you, but do you go back to your room and finish dressing. I will come over in a few minutes and call as if nothing had happened."

The calmer counsels of the lawyer prevailed, and Topliff returned to the inn. In a few minutes Sharply went over and quietly asked for Dr. Topliff.

"He is in his room," said Mrs. Hartman. "Some one has outrageously mutilated his horse, and he is all broken up over it."

"Were any other horses injured?" Sharply innocently inquired.

"There was no other horse in the stable."

"O, I thought I saw a young lady stop here yesterday afternoon with a black horse."

As he said this he cast a sharp quick glance at Mrs. Hartman and then asked in the most natural way possible,

"Do you have any idea who committed this outrage, Mrs. Hartman?"

"I can't imagine who could have done it or what his motive could have been."

"What does Mr. Hartman think about it?" queried the lawyer with another sharp glance at the hostess.

There was a little hesitation and confusion. Then came the perfectly truthful reply,

"I don't know." Then she quickly added, "you would better go up and see Mr. Topliff. He can tell you more about it than I can."

So saying she excused herself as having to look after breakfast and turned away to avoid any further questions.

"Topliff," said the lawyer upon entering the clergyman's room, "this thing has happened. You, knowing that I was in town, started over to take legal advice of me and, in your excitement, forgot to complete your toilet before coming. That is your explanation if ever you should be asked how it happened that we were seen together under certain circumstances this morning. That understood, the situation is this: for some reason the bird concluded to continue her flight last night, and this old curmudgeon of a Hartman has undertaken to pilot her through the mountains by one pass or the other. Jack went in to clip the wings of the bird and found only one horse in the barn. All horses are black in the darkness. Naturally supposing the only horse to be the right one, he clipped the wings of the owl instead of the pigeon. Let us face the situation and act sensibly. Your horse, which was not worth very much last night, is worth nothing this morning. Hire some one to take him out and shoot him; charge his worth to the account of profit and loss. And I will set a hawk upon the path of the pigeon."

CHAPTER XXIX

GLOCKSIN'S BAND

DURING the day, Mr. Harris had kept a close watch for any traveler who might be passing through the valley.

About two hours before sunset a lone horseman emerged from the Jaguar Pass. This horseman wore a canvas suit sleek with wear. His broad brimmed slouch hat shaded and partly concealed a pair of small, black eyes that glistened like great beads in a swarthy, sullen face upon every feature of which crime had left its indelible marks.

There were two cabins in the valley which bore no very savory reputation. It was well understood in the neighborhood that the men of these two disreputable cabins knew more about the doings of a certain gang of robbers than they were disposed to tell.

The horseman went first to one and then the other of the cabins, from the latter of which he did not emerge until the next morning, when he continued his journey to the southwest. Mr. Harris made it his business to learn what he could about this traveler and found that he had made diligent inquiry concerning a woman on a black horse in company with Caleb Hartman whom everybody in the valley knew.

Late the same evening this desperate man found his way into the rendezvous of his criminal confederates.

"Hello! Jack, what brings you this way?"

"Hev you bin watchin' the trail?" was Jack's answer to the query.

"Course we hev. Not a soul hez passed durin' the last four days. Are you 'spectin' suthin' comin' our way?"

"Whar's the boss?" asked Jack.

"There hain't much been doin' lately an' grub was gittin' low. Him an' the rest hez went huntin'. 'Spect 'em back 'fore this time. But ye hain't said whether anythin' is comin' our way."

"You're in a devil of a hurry to know," sullenly replied Jack.

"Well, ye needn't be so damn crusty 'bout it!"

Jack would probably have returned some further profane reply had not the expected hunters just then come in sight. They were soon in camp, having brought with them a pair of fine deer. Jack ate heartily of the rude supper prepared by the cook of the band, and wearied by a hard day's ride, rolled himself up in a blanket and was soon sound asleep.

The next morning the members of the banditti were lounging about waiting for Jack to get into the mood for telling them what was on his mind. At length, one of the gang, for the purpose of setting Jack to talking, proposed that the whole band go off into the mountains for a day's hunt.

"I reckon," said Jack, "some on ye hed better keep yer eyes on the trail fer a day or two."

"What's comin'?" asked a half dozen voices in chorus.

"Not much in one way, but a good deal in 'nother. Only a woman on a black hoss."

This statement was met by a laugh of derision. Jack scowled, while a look of sullen defiance shot out from his little black eyes.

"Laugh an' be damned!" he said.

"Come, Jack," said one of his friends, "we know ther's more to this than you've told us on. Tell us all 'bout it an' don't keep us waitin'."

"Well, ye know 'bout thet damned Armby. He had some sort o' trouble up in X——, sump'n 'bout a woman. This woman is on the way to Deep River with word of some kind fer him. Fer some reason lawyer Sharply an' preacher Topliff wants her stopped on the way an' hez offered us a big pile if we'll keep 'er from reachin' Armby."

This gang of outlaws had no love for Albert Armby. He had organized the better element of the Deep River country for mutual protection against the lawless characters that infested the district. More than once these bandits had felt the weight of his strong arm. Several of them had met their fate in encounters with Armby's men while others had been captured and turned over to the camp court for trial and suitable punishment. Though the bandits knew that Armby always insisted upon giving the accused an impartial trial, still they regarded him as their worst foe and were ready to do anything in their power to his disadvantage.

"We lost track on 'er at Canyon Village an' s'posed thet old Hartman had piloted 'er over Jaguar Pass at night. I follered nex' mornin' but hev not been able to fetch up with 'er. Our fren's at Pleasant Valley says she hain't come thet way. I'm goin' back by the Fox

River trail an' ef she comes by Pleasant Valley ye must take care on 'er."

"Ef she comes this way, Jack, w'at are we to do?" asked one of the gang.

"Dead people tells no tales," was Jack's significant reply.

"Look 'ere, Jack Duval or Jack Devil," said the other, "do you take us fer a set of white-livered cowards? When it comes to shootin' or molestin' a defenseless woman you may count me on t'other side."

"You're a chicken-hearted fool an' afeerd of an owl!" angrily replied Jack Duval.

At this his companion grasped his rifle and said coolly,

"Ef ye think I'm afeerd of an owl jes' step off sixty yards or a hundred or ten, an' I'll show yer ther's one owl thet I ain't afeerd on."

Jack was no coward and accepted the challenge as promptly and as coolly as it had been given.

"As yer named sixty fust, sixty 'tis," said he.

Taking his rifle in his hand and examining it to see that it was loaded and ready for use, he began deliberately to measure by long strides the sixty yards. Both these fearless men were dead shots at any distance to which their rifles would carry. Such a challenge therefore was never given or accepted by any one who was not willing to face almost certain death. Yet there was not the slightest change of color on either face, not a tremor of a hand or finger. Thirty, forty, fifty steps were taken.

A large, broad-shouldered man of about forty years, his face covered nearly to his eyes with a black beard

in which here and there, was a thread of white, had sat quietly by, smoking his briar-root pipe without uttering a word. While the distance was being measured, the other members of the gang looked first at him and then at the two men, but said nothing. But a few steps of the sixty remained to be measured, when the silent man arose and walked out between the men. When Jack had finished the measurement and turned about with the words,

"Are you ready?" he faced, not his antagonist, but the bearded man who then spoke for the first time.

"Put down your guns," said he.

Each man dropped his gun to his side and stood waiting for further orders, for the speaker possessed authority which these men were accustomed to obey. While the members of this band of robbers set at naught all law and defied the authority of society, they had clothed this man with the authority of an autocrat and had sworn implicit obedience to his commands. What is an oath to men like these? More than it is to many a witness before a court of justice, who swears to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and then tells whatever he thinks will best serve his own ends or the ends of another in whose interests he may have been called. These men, who would, perhaps, be guilty of the same thing in a court of justice, had banded themselves together against law and properly constituted authority; but when to one another they made a declaration ending "s'elp me God!" they would keep their oath even to the death. To them the word of Anton Glocksin was law, and they feared his word

more than the crack of each other's rifle. He motioned to the men who meekly slunk back to their places.

"I must warn you, Jack," said he, "against this indiscriminate killing. You have already gotten all our necks into the halter. Kill only when absolutely necessary. Dave is right. A woman is entitled to our protection. Since, however, you have agreed with your man Sharply to prevent this woman reaching Armby, it shall be done. But there are other means of doing it. When these fail, it is time enough to think about killing."

"All the same," said Jack sullenly, "dead people tells no tales."

"I am not so sure of that," said Glocksin, who immediately issued such orders as he deemed necessary to intercept the traveler.

For more than a week, Edna abode under the friendly roof of Thomas Harris. He and his good wife did all they could to relieve the tedium of her stay; while she, for her part, made herself as useful as possible to her hostess. At length, thanks to the care and skill of Mr. Harris, the injured foot was healed—not so much as a scar remaining from the injury. The horse was newly shod and ready for the road. It was deemed best that Edna should take her leave very early in the morning before any one in the valley should be astir. Accordingly, long before the sky was gray with coming dawn, she had mounted her eager horse and resumed her journey.

Pleasant Valley was marvelously fertile, but terminated at its lower end, almost abruptly, in a barren,

sterile waste without a single tree, a spire of grass or even a shrub of sage brush.

When day at last dawned and the sun had chased away all shadows, Edna's heart, for a little while, almost failed her. As far as the eye could penetrate, no living thing, animal or vegetable, was to be seen, save some strange species of bird, sailing alone high above the earth. It seemed to her that it was a bird of ill-omen, giving emphasis to the loneliness of the vast and desolate region.

On the earth there was not even the sign of life. This barren steppe was too dreary for the coyote, the prairie dog, or even the gopher. Yonder on the left, in the midst of this desolation and many miles away, stood a huge pile which could scarcely be called a mountain, though many hundred feet high. Its sides were ashen and its summit the color of brick-dust. It seemed a volcano dying in the bosom of a dead inferno.

Far away to the right arose perpendicular walls of appalling height, also of the color of dark brick-dust. Before, there was only the seemingly boundless stretch of barren waste, with now and then a reddish pile like the one just described. The ground was perfectly dry, and packed, or rather baked hard and smooth. Great chasms opened as if in primeval times the crust had been intensely heated and had split in the process of cooling. The whole was as a vast crater which had lived and flourished and was now forever dead.

Edna loved solitude, and had courted it amid mountain fastnesses; but she had never, until now, known what solitude meant. In her mountain rambles,

she found variety in scenery; intervening valleys with springs of sparkling water; trees and flowers about the bases of the mountain; here and there, far up its rocky sides a wild flower looking as if it had strayed away, became frightened and hid in a crevice of the rocks—pale with fright or blushing to be discovered. Further up, she had found the blue flowers in the melting borders of the snow. Go where she would, she ever saw objects with life or its semblance. So long as this was true, solitude was not absolute.

But if there had ever been any living things, in this sunken desert, they had long since vanished. There was no variety in formation or color other than a far distant wall on the right and an occasional reddish pile in the plain. There was nothing she could commune with. Everything repelled her. The occasional bird that soared above this weird region was too distant for association even in thought except, indeed, as a bird of ill-omen. Here for the first time in life Edna Lee experienced a solitude that became oppressive. As she rode on and on through the dreary hours, she became so oppressed with the mighty void around her that she began to realize that the tremendous solitude of nature might in time strike madness to the soundest mind.

"Whither am I going? Is there any end to this horrible region? Is there any one living beyond its confines? I wonder if I shall ever see another human being!"

Then it occurred to her that she had been told of this dreadful region and that it extended through nearly a day's ride. Under the feeling that she must fly out of the desolation that surrounded her, she gave rein to

her horse and went sweeping over the hard path with the fleetness of the wind. Remembering that this was but wasting his strength for naught, she checked his speed to a swinging walk.

Her only relief from the awful silence and solitude which oppressed her, was the slight sound of her horse's feet and the conversation she carried on with him—she patting his neck and, in a tone of confidence, asking him many questions and telling him many things which, perhaps, he already understood—he responding by shakes and nods of his head, and quick motions of his dainty ears. The sun was now midway between the zenith and the western horizon, and seen through the hazy atmosphere, had the appearance of a great ball of blood-red fire.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, it seemed to Edna that she caught a glimpse of mountains in the far distance. The feeling of oppression left her immediately, for she felt sure that she saw the terminus of the dreary waste and the end of her journey for the day. She again gave rein to her horse, but held him down to an easy gallop for an hour, during which he brought her ten or a dozen miles nearer the mountains. Now she could distinguish trees, and smoke rising up against the mountainside. In another hour, she reined up her horse on the bank of a river three or four hundred feet wide, the waters of which, though the current was swift, were thick with yellow sediment. On the opposite side of the stream there were two or three log cabins and perhaps a dozen dingy tents. A rude ferry-boat was operated by means of a cable stretched from bank to bank. The owner of the boat rightly

guessing that she desired his services, came over with his boat and took her across.

Edna found herself in a community of two white families and a troup of Indians who made a scanty living by hunting, trapping, fishing and incidentally prospecting for gold. Never in her life was she more delighted to see human faces—never was a human habitation more welcome than the cabin into which she was shown.

After an excellent supper of trout from a near by mountain stream, together with potatoes roasted in the embers of an outdoor fire, bread, butter and coffee, followed by a dish of wild strawberries picked by some Indian girls along the river's bank, she was shown a small room at the end of the cabin, where, after a weary day, she rested sweetly, as rests the pilgrim at the end of a toilsome journey.

CHAPTER XXX

THE CHASE

AFTER a restful night Edna, buoyant and hopeful, commenced the most eventful day of her journey. She had made careful inquiry respecting the remainder of the route, and had been told that she could not possibly lose her way—that she had but to remain on the left bank of the stream and follow the only trail over the mountain range.

If she could have gone directly across the range, it would not have been more than ten or twelve miles to the mining camp where she expected to find Albert Armby. But she must travel up the valley for a distance of nearly fifteen miles, cross the range at what was known as the Antler's pass, and then descend another valley to a point nearly opposite the one from which she started in the morning.

Her heart leaped with delight at the thought that before the sun should go down she would reach the end of her journey, meet once more the man who had suffered so much on her account and bring to him such tidings of joy. The heart is light and time sweeps by with swiftest wing when the mind is intent on pleasant themes. Nothing so harmonizes one with the universe of things as the consciousness of being moved by a noble purpose to some enterprise which promises to bring blessings to the lives of others. Edna, there-

fore felt herself in sweet accord with the great world in which she moved.

The waters of the murky river grew clearer as she proceeded along its bank, until they were transparent in their greenish blue. The valley lay between two mountain spurs, the bases of which were, at times, a mile or more apart; and again separated by only a few hundred feet. There was a liberal growth of balsam, pine and fir-trees in the valley, extending well up the mountainsides. Above them were the rocky gorges and dizzy crags; far above these the snow covered peaks; above all the blue sky and above the blue sky, God, in whom Edna was serenely but unconsciously trusting.

After riding leisurely for two or three hours, to her surprise the mountain spurs seemed to come together and form an impassable wall across the stream a mile or so distant.

"There is a way through," thought she, and rode on without a doubt that all barriers to the goal towards which she moved would be surmounted. But the nearer she approached, the more it seemed that there was an impenetrable wall across her path. Upon reaching a certain angle of vision, however, she saw a small opening which at first appeared scarcely wide enough to permit a horseman to pass through. When she reached the place she found that the mountain appeared to have been split open by some tremendous force. The granite faces on either side arose perpendicularly from the water's edge to more than a thousand feet in height while the stream rushed through the narrow opening with terrific power and a deafening

roar. These walls were not more than two rods apart, and the place had been absolutely impassable but for the fact that, by a skilfully devised system of braces between the two walls a causeway had been suspended along the face of the rock and over the surging waters.

A short distance beyond this gate in the mountains, a small stream flowed into the river from the south. Along this tributary her path led, rising higher and higher above the stream. Then following its sinuous way about the mountainsides until noon, she found herself at the highest point of the trail. Here she dismounted, gave her horse his allowance of oats and ate with a relish the lunch provided by her hostess of the previous night.

A strange situation indeed! A little, unprotected woman, miles away from any human being, alone amid the solitudes of these mountain heights! Woman is proverbially timid; yet a braver creature does not live than a woman inspired by a high and noble resolve. Wild beasts there were; but if she thought of them at all, it was not with fear. Of the bandits, fiercer and more dangerous than wild beats, she doubtless thought; but her purpose knew no weakness, and she went on her way guarded by that beneficent power which watches over unprotected innocence.

It was not more than two hours' ride to where the trail descended into the valley. Though the bases of the mountains on either side were fringed by a growth of pine, there were no trees in this valley except some clusters of scrub pine and an occasional stunted fir-tree. The valley was very dry, and the trail sometimes

lay through miles of sandy earth making the traveling exceedingly slavish for man or beast. Now and then a deep gulch made down from the mountains. Most of these gulches were dry at this season of the year, though occasionally one would be traversed by a slender stream fed from springs or the melted snows of the mountains.

For nearly a week after Jack Duval's visit to his fellow-criminals, they had kept a close watch upon the trail for the coming of Edna with her black horse. After several days' watching, they concluded that her courage had failed her and that she had turned back; or that she had fallen into the hands of Jack Duval upon his return towards the city, in which case they did not need to conjecture what her fate had been. They had moved their camp to the head of the valley about a mile above the point where the trail descended from the mountains, their camp being so situated as to be entirely hidden from the passer-by, while they could easily keep watch upon the trail. It was next to impossible for any one to pass either way without being discovered by them. Edna had entered the valley and was riding leisurely along the trail, when one of the bandits sprang to his feet and cried,

"There she goes!"

Within two minutes a half dozen men were in their saddles and on the gallop towards the valley. Edna had felt more than ordinarily secure during the whole day. When she entered this valley and knew that two or three hours' ride at most would bring her to the end of her journey and to the man she sought, a calm and confident feeling pervaded her. She busied her mind

only with thoughts of how she should convey to him the good news she brought, and how she should be able to control her emotions upon meeting the man for whom she would willingly have given up life itself, if need be. She noticed that her horse seemed uneasy.

"What now, my lover?" she said. "You are not getting nervous when the danger is past!"

Her words quieted him but for a moment. Then he became still more restless and threw his head to one side as if seeing something behind him. Edna, too, looked back; and lo! scarcely a half mile away, was a string of armed horsemen in hot pursuit. She did not need to be told who these men were. She was not frightened—scarcely excited except for a moment. She did not believe the horse lived that could overtake her black beauty. After the first moment's flurry, she rather enjoyed the idea of leading them a merry race. She had only to give her horse a little rein and he went bounding over the trail with such speed as quickly to increase the distance between her and her pursuers. She held her horse in, well knowing his speed and powers of endurance.

"We'll show them a trick or two, won't we, sweetheart? They might as well try to overtake the raven in its flight!"

But she knew not what manner of beasts these robbers rode. There is in the west a species of horse called a "Cayuse." They are neither large nor swift of foot; but they have bones of iron and muscles of steel. There seems to be no limit to their powers of endurance. They have been known to carry a man

more than a hundred miles a day—not for one day only but for days at a stretch. It was this kind of horse that was pursuing her fleet and beautiful steed. The deer can outrun the wolf; but the wolf can outlast the deer.

Whenever a rise of ground over which she had passed, or a clump of scrub pine intervened between her and her pursuers, she would give her horse a little more rein, thinking how they would be disappointed when coming in sight of her again, to find she had left them far behind.

But the sandy trail began to tell upon her horse. At every leap of the noble animal, his small agate-like feet sank out of sight in the shifting sands, while scarcely an impression was made by the broad flat hoofs of the wiry Cayuse. Edna first noticed that where the reins touched her horse's neck, they were flecked with foam. She patted his neck with her hand only to find that every hair was wet with perspiration. Then she noticed that the backs of his small ears were also wet—an unfavorable sign.

She looked over her shoulder and was dismayed to see that her relentless pursuers were scarcely a quarter of a mile behind her. Her only hope now was that she might reach the mining camp before her horse became exhausted. She bent forward and uttered some words which the horse seemed fully to understand. He stretched himself over the road as was his wont at his highest speed, in a last desperate effort to carry his mistress beyond the reach of the devils from which she was fleeing. He was speeding away from them as the deer from the hound, when there was the crack

of a rifle followed by a volley mingled with shouts and yells. Before she was aware of it she was near the brink of a gulch fifteen or twenty feet wide and half as deep, in the sandy bed of which flowed a small stream of water. The horse did not hesitate a second but made a tremendous leap to clear the gulch from bank to bank. In spite of his desperate effort he came short and fell upon the sands below. With a groan, he rolled over on his side, panting for breath. Edna quickly gathered herself up from the sands upon which she had been thrown, and running to her horse, took his shapely head in her lap.

"O! they have killed my horse! my dear good horse! O! what shall I do! My good horse, my lover, my pet!"

Thinking that her horse had been shot and absorbed in her concern for him, she scarcely looked up as a half dozen men rode down the steep bank of the gulch to where she knelt. Two or three of them dismounted. One said,

"Take your handkerchief, George, dip it in water and moisten the nostrils and the tongue of the horse, and the rest of you pluck some pine boughs and set to rubbing him."

At his first words, Edna sprang to her feet and looked eagerly into the faces of the men.

"Did I not hear Albert Armby speak?" she exclaimed.

"Yes," said the speaker, a tall, fine looking fellow with a liberal growth of auburn whiskers curling about his face, "I am Albert Armby. But what on earth are you doing here, Edna?"

She stood for a moment as one petrified. Every drop of blood fled from her face. The world grew dark about her and she would have fallen had not Armby caught her and laid her gently on the ground. Taking his handkerchief from his pocket, he said to one of the men,

"Dip that in the water and bring it to me quickly."

He bathed her face with the moistened handkerchief. A brusque Hibernian came running up with a flask in his hand.

"Misther Armby," said he, "I wouldn't be afther offerin' ye onything to dhrink; but a bit o' this brandy will do her good if yer kin get 'er to dhrink it."

Armby poured some of the brandy upon his handkerchief, held it under Edna's nostrils, then moistened her lips with a few drops from the bottle. At length a tint of color returned to her cheek, and a slight tremor ran through her frame as she opened her eyes. At first she was bewildered at what she saw. Three men were half leading, half carrying a young man down the side of the gulch, his face pallid and a bullet-hole through his chest.

"Mr. Armby," said one of the men, "this man says he has something he wants to tell you."

The wounded man was unable to occupy a prone position, hence they placed him in a sitting posture with his back against the bank of the gulch.

"Make haste!" said the man, "for I am afraid I haven't much time to lose."

But before Armby would permit him to talk, he made an examination of his wound and found that the ball had passed clear through the body penetrating the

lungs; and that at every exertion the man made the blood spurted from the gaping wound.

"Clark," said Armby to one of the men, "ride for Dr. Slater, quick."

"It will do no good to send for a doctor; and I don't want one. I want to tell you all about it and then die. I don't want to live any more."

The man was ashen pale and his lips were blue. He leaned his head against the bank with the appearance of one who had just died.

"I believe the man is dead," said Armby.

"Misther Armby," said the Irishman, "whedher it's a maiden in a faint or a robber with a hole through his back, this is the stuff fer yer. If onything will bring back a mon's spirit, it is more spirits!" With this he again produced the bottle of brandy.

Meantime Armby had felt for the man's pulse, placed his ear over his heart and found that there was still a remnant of life. The man's face was bathed with water and brandy until he began to revive. Some of the liquor was offered him. He grasped the bottle eagerly and drank till its owner was thoroughly alarmed lest none should be left for himself.

"Now," said the man, "while its effects last, listen to me. It was I, Mr. Armby, that pulled that hood, filled with chloroform over your head, while Sam Woods and Mike Karns held your hands. Then Burly Bill, who brought you there in the buggy came in and we took you in the buggy to Miss—what's her name's. We had a key that opened the door and after we got you in, we undressed you and put you in the bed. We made you drink stuff we had prepared in whiskey,

left the basket and bottles in the room, put the key in your pocket and left. It was all carried out as planned by Sharply, and we got fifty dollars apiece for the job."

The man was greatly exhausted by the effort required to tell his story and was on the point of fainting again, when the invaluable brandy bottle was once more brought into requisition.

"Where was I?" asked the wounded bandit.

"You said," suggested Armby, "that you received fifty dollars each for what you did."

"O, yes. That's about all there is to it. After the job was done, Sharply introduced me to Jack Duval, and through his persuasion I come out into this country until the worst should blow over. I soon found into what sort of company I had fallen. But it's good enough for me—I've got my dues—only I'm glad that I got this off my mind before I die."

Edna stood by and listened to this man's confession with a joy she could scarcely control. The chain of evidence in the hands of Armby's friends was not quite complete. Here every missing link was supplied and his vindication was assured. She fell upon her knees, took the man's hand in hers, pressed and caressed it tenderly, while the tears coursed down her cheeks.

"You must not die! you must live to tell the world what you have just told us. You are not a bad man at heart. You have my confidence and my gratitude and shall always have my friendship."

The tears came to the wretched man's eyes, and through his tears he saw a vision of another kneeling

woman, whose counsels he had disregarded, but whose image had never quite faded from his heart. Edna had touched a cord which had long lain dormant in this man's nature. The confidence and friendship of a good woman was something he had not known—had not deserved to know in many a day, and now that he was assured of this boon, it was as food to a hungry heart, drink to a famishing soul. This sensation was but momentary. At the recollection of the wrong he had done her, he abruptly withdrew his hand as if it was contaminated by a plague he might impart to her.

"No!" said he, "it was a mean, cowardly thing for me to do. I do not deserve either your confidence or friendship. Let me die the miserable wretch I have lived."

"Not so," said Edna. "I am sure you were drawn into it by designing men, and that it was not your better self that did it. And now you have it in your power to be of great help to us in restoring to Mr. Armby the good name of which he has been robbed and in bringing the real criminals to justice."

The man closed his eyes. His whole life passed before him in a moment of time; his childhood, his devoted mother of whom he had not heard for years; his young manhood; his drifting out west with no aim other than to get far away from all that reminded him of the bitter disappointment he had experienced in a love affair; his fruitless efforts to find employment; his penury and destitution; the temptation to earn in a single night more money than he had owned in a year; his yielding to the temptation and his rapid downward way

to the depth of outlawry in which he had received what he believed to be his death-wound. Then he opened his eyes, and looking Edna full in the face, said:

"You tell me that I have your confidence and friendship. I believe you. You tell me that I must live to help restore to this man the good name of which I helped to rob him. Well, if determination has anything to do with it, I will live to do all you say—but most of all to prove myself worthy of your confidence and respect."

At this moment Clark returned with the doctor of the mining camp. After an examination of the man's wounds, he said:

"The injury is not necessarily fatal, though the wound is an exceedingly dangerous one."

Armby took the Doctor aside and informed him of the confession the man had made.

"You don't tell me!" exclaimed the Doctor. "Die? Not if I can help it. We'll take him to my house and I'll watch over him day and night."

The wounds were temporarily dressed and the man was borne upon an improvised stretcher to the Doctor's house.

"How did it happen," asked Edna as the party rode to the camp, "that you were there just in the nick of time?"

"A few of us went into the hills this morning on a prospecting trip and incidentally to kill some game; we were on our return, when looking up the valley, we saw you riding at the top of your horse's speed. In a moment more we saw a rider come up over a rise in the ground who was evidently in hot pursuit, then

another and another until there were no less than a half dozen men in the gang. I recognized the black horse and his rider and quickly guessed who were the pursuers. I ordered our men to conceal themselves among the pine trees that fringed the base of the mountains and not to fire until I gave the word. The Irishman became nervous and fired before the word was given. A volley was poured into the ranks of the bandits. Two of them were killed outright while a third was severely wounded. The others turned and fled, even faster than they had come."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE RETURN

AFTER her toilsome ride and the excitement of the previous day, Edna was sorely in need of rest and quiet. At the end of three days, during which Armby had arranged his affairs with a view to an indefinite absence, she and her horse were fully rested and ready to begin the return trip. A number of armed men accompanied Albert and Edna. To have started alone would have been to put themselves at the tender mercies of the bandits who, though intimidated by their recent experiences, thirsted for revenge.

On the way, Albert by dint of questioning, learned much of Edna's cruel experiences, of the extremities to which she had been reduced, of the noble conduct of Colonel Blakeslee and Evelyn in her hour of extremity, and of the strong friendship which had sprung up between Evelyn and herself. When Evelyn became the theme of their conversation, it did not escape Edna's notice that she had in Armby an eager listener.

They reached Pleasant Valley late in the afternoon. Edna's old friends, the Harrises, received her with open arms as one who had returned after a long journey; though she had been gone a little less than a week. She rested for the night in the comfortable bed which had been hers during the week she had spent in their hospitable home.

As the way from Pleasant Valley to X—— was free from the depredations of bandits, the guard returned to the Deep River camp while Albert and Edna continued their journey. During the day they crossed the difficult Jaguar Pass. Many times Edna shuddered as she beheld in broad daylight, the perilous places over which she had been conducted in the night by her old friend Caleb Hartman. It was no less a matter of astonishment to Albert that such a trip had been attempted.

"Why did you ever think of coming over this dangerous trail in the dead of night?" he asked.

"Because—because I felt that I must," said she.

Albert saw from her manner that there was some potent reason which she hesitated to name.

"Never mind answering," said he. "There is some good reason you do not care to give."

"I did hesitate," replied Edna, "whether it were best to tell you; but I am sure I don't see why you should not know."

She then related the conversation between Sharply and Topliff to which she had listened on that sinister night, and told him how she had confided in Mr. Hartman who had conducted her over the pass that she might escape the cruel plot. Armby, who was riding in the lead, stopped, turned upon his horse and looked at Edna with an expression of horror and indignation upon his face.

"Monstrous!" he exclaimed. "Were it any one I could doubt who tells me this horrible story, I should say 'impossible!' I am appalled at the depths of this man's villainy."

While Edna had told him in a general way, how Topliff had pursued her, she had carefully avoided any suggestion as to the motive that had prompted him.

The journey was resumed in silence. Albert Armby was too busy with his own thoughts to indulge in conversation. At last he broke the silence by repeating,

"Edna, were it not that I have learned to place your word above question, I could not believe such villainy possible. Ever since I was a boy of twelve I have lived in an atmosphere of mutual confidence. Until this trouble came up, I believed in everybody; but the experiences of the last few months have sorely shaken my confidence. It would not take much more to cause me to lose all faith in human integrity."

Edna made no reply. After another long silence he continued:

"After all one never knows what true friendship is until some calamity befalls him. This dreadful ordeal has taught me who my real friends are, and they are to me as gold tried in the fire; and believe me, Edna, there is none whose faith and friendship have felt the fire like yours—none whose confidence and heroism I so greatly prize."

Poor Edna, whose heart had hungered so much for a share in this man's regard, found it hard to keep back the tears as she listened to his earnest words. It was some moments before she could trust herself to speak.

"I have only done my duty, Mr. Armby. I have felt all along that I was in some measure to blame for your misfortune. The determination to aid in un-

masking the perpetrators of that dastardly deed and in restoring your good name, has kept me alive when otherwise I should have given up the struggle to live. Now that success is assured, the knowledge that I have borne some humble part in the work, and that you prize so highly the little I have been able to do, gives me more happiness than I have ever expected to know."

"God bless you, Edna! It is strange how our fates seem linked in this unfortunate affair. Who knows but it may, after all, turn out to be less a misfortune than we have thought. Out of what we have regarded as so great a disaster, may yet come some greater good which will more than compensate for all we have suffered."

"I sincerely hope there may," said Edna.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, when emerging from the canyon which formed the eastern entrance to the Jaguar Pass, they came in sight of Canyon Village, nestled against the foot-hills at the base of the mountains on the opposite side of the valley.

"I have told you," said Edna, "of Mr. and Mrs. Hartman who have been such good friends to me. I promised to stop on my return and tell them of my trip."

"We may as well stop with them until to-morrow morning. We could not reach the city without traveling most of the night. This would be too much for you. Furthermore, I am anxious to meet the Hartmans that I may thank them for their helpfulness both to you and to myself."

In due time they reined up in front of the Hartman

house. Edna and her black horse were quickly recognized by Mr. Hartman who came out, bare-headed and in his shirt-sleeves, his kindly face beaming with the pleasure he felt.

"Well! well! Glad to see you! Found your way all right?"

"Mr. Hartman, this is the Mr. Armby I told you about."

Albert extended his hand which the innkeeper cordially grasped and shook and squeezed until it fairly ached.

"This is Mr. Armby! Well, I'm glad to see you! Here, George, take these horses and give them the best there is in the barn. Miss Edna, you needn't worry about your horse—he'll be well cared for and won't have his ham-strings cut either. Ha! ha! ha! That was a good joke—only it was too bad for the poor horse."

Edna and Albert looked at him a little puzzled, not understanding what he meant.

"O, I forgot. That was after you had gone. You see—but we'll go into the house and make you comfortable, and then I will tell you all about it."

By this time they had mounted the two or three steps leading to the old-fashioned porch which ran the whole length of the inn. They were met by Mrs. Hartman, a stout, fat, kind-hearted motherly woman, who took Edna in her arms and kissed her time and again with such genuine affection as to recall to Albert's mind a time when he, a hunted boy, flew into a woman's arms to escape an enraged and cruel man.

All that the Hartman house could be made to afford, was put at the disposal of its guests. After they had, by a liberal application of water, soap and towels, removed the stains of travel, they were shown into the private living rooms of Mr. and Mrs. Hartman.

"Make yourselves at home. You must not consider yourselves as strangers at an inn, but as visitors of old friends."

"By the way, Mr. Hartman," said Albert, "you were to tell us about the ham-string affair."

"O, yes," said Mr. Hartman, and then went on to tell them of what happened to Topliff's horse, and how it was evidently intended for Edna's. While the incident had its amusing features, Edna was filled with indignation as she thought of the cruelty intended for her own noble horse.

Owing to the presence of a company of miners on their way to the Deep River country, every room in the house was occupied, so it was arranged that Edna should sleep with Mrs. Hartman, while cots were provided in the family living-room for Albert and Mr. Hartman.

After Edna and Mrs. Hartman had retired to their room, Mrs. Hartman seemed in no haste to go to bed; but, without appearing to be inquisitive, engaged Edna in conversation about her trip. She had learned from her husband about the journey over Jaguar Pass, the injury to Edna's horse and about his having left her in the safe care of the Harrises. Edna related the chief incidents in her journey, in which her listener manifested a deep interest, especially in the chase of the bandits.

"You are a brave girl, my darling; but there is no telling what a girl will do for the man she loves, and——"

Mrs. Hartman was quick to notice that her words were giving Edna pain, and checked herself.

"I beg your pardon, my child," she said, "I did not mean to embarrass you."

"You mistake my motive, Mrs. Hartman. I suppose Mr. Hartman told you why I started upon this journey. I had no other motive than to do all in my power to repair the damage done to the reputation of one of the noblest of men, and at the same time to vindicate my own honor."

"Better still! A girl will even do some foolish things for her lover; but one prompted by your motive can only do noble things. Well, I have already kept you up longer than I should. You must be tired; so we will get ready for bed."

Edna took her nightgown from a small satchel and was dressing for bed, when Mrs. Hartman said:

"Dear Edna, let me see once more the name on your arm."

"Certainly," said Edna, smiling and blushing. She pushed her sleeve up to the shoulder, exposing a small round arm, firm and perfectly formed, on which was tattooed in very small but plain letters the word "Edna." Mrs. Hartman looked at the letters, then looked intently into Edna's face as if she saw the name written there, and then once more at the arm. At last she touched the name with her lips and kissed it tenderly while Edna felt the touch of tears upon her arm.

"Dear mother Hartman," said Edna, "why do you weep? You have allowed what I have said to excite too greatly your sympathy. Let us go to bed, and we will both soon forget all about it in a good night's sleep."

"My dear, dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Hartman, and clasping both arms about Edna, she drew the girl to her lap and caressed her as if she were a little child. Meantime Mrs. Hartman's thoughts went back over nearly a quarter of a century, to a time when she sat in this same easy chair rocking and soothing a sobbing little babe upon whose arm had just been tattooed a name of four letters, while its mother lay upon her pillow with the tears flowing down her white face. Ah! Edna Lee, you do not know—must not know, why this motherly woman, who has never had a child of her own to love, presses you so tenderly to her heart, while she gives vent to her love and sympathy in tears which she would control, but cannot. Edna yielded willingly to Mrs. Hartman's embrace, feeling that this good woman was bestowing upon her a mother's love.

"Dear mother Hartman," said Edna, while she smoothed the gray hairs of the woman's head, "I wish I had always had a mother's love like yours. I think I should have been a better girl!"

"You are a brave good girl who deserves a better fate than thus far you have met. I trust that some day God will give you a happier lot!"

The two retired, Edna to that deep and quiet sleep which follows long fatigue; Mrs. Hartman to spend much of the night in thinking of other days—and per-

haps, debating with herself the question, whether a promise made so many years ago ought longer to be kept.

Morning came. The travelers, refreshed by a good supper, a night's sound slumber and a wholesome breakfast, began the last day of their journey. As they disappeared down the road, Edna waved her hand to her friends as they stood looking after her from the porch.

"What a change!" exclaimed Mrs. Hartman. "I never would have believed that she could become so pretty. She is the very picture of Marian when at her age."

"It is strange that we have never heard from Marian. I wonder if she could have received our letters."

"She is in X——. I asked Edna if she had heard anything of the little woman she used to tell us about. She said that shortly after she came to X——, the little woman came also. Edna had a very severe attack of fever last winter, when Marian managed to become her nurse. The child thinks Marian did not recognize her until this sickness. Edna said that many times she had seen the little woman, who had become so changed that she did not know her. After she got well she visited Marian's room very often and soon discovered her old friend."

"Mother, I've a notion that we go up to X—— and fetch Marian home with us. What do you say?"

"Why not write to her?"

"We do not know her address."

"That's so. I have been thinking very seriously, Caleb, whether we ought longer to keep that secret."

"We will take it with us to the grave, mother, unless Marian shall release us from our promise."

"Well, Caleb, a promise is sometimes better broken than kept."

"That's true, mother. Conditions may arise under which our promise will cease to be binding. I put Armby under pledge of secrecy and then told him that if ever life or death, or reputation, or truth and justice should demand that the parentage of Edna be known, to call on me."

CHAPTER XXXII

LIGHT AT EVENTIME

WHILE Edna was absent on her trip to the Deep River country, the Little Woman in Black was taken seriously ill. Dr. Winslow was called and did for the patient all that his skill and mature experience enabled him to do. Colonel Blakeslee was informed of her sickness. He directed Dr. Winslow to procure the most competent nurse he could find, and to see that the little woman lacked for nothing. But her malady did not yield readily to treatment.

At night, in the delirium of her fever, she seemed to imagine that some one lay in her arms. She would prattle tenderly about something which the nurse could not quite understand, though several times the words: "My baby! my darling baby!" were distinguished. During the day her fever would subside, her mind become perfectly clear and her conversation rational; but it was all upon one topic. How long has Edna been gone? Have they heard from her since she started? How long would it take her to go and come? Did she, the nurse, know where Edna had gone?

"I know. She told me before she left. Oh! I hope she will get back before——"

She finished the sentence only with tears; but the nurse understood, and soothed her as best she could.

Colonel Blakeslee called every morning on his way down town.

"Colonel Blakeslee, when will Edna come?" were the first words that greeted him each morning.

"She ought to make the trip inside of ten days. We expect her any time," the Colonel would reply.

Nearly twice ten days had passed, and she had not come, nor had any word been received from her. Dr. Winslow told the Colonel that the sickness was aggravated by the worry of the patient about the absent girl. To tell the truth, she was not the only one who was spending many anxious hours over the long and unaccountable delay. The Colonel and Evelyn each noted the anxiety of the other.

"I do not think, Colonel," said the Doctor on the morning of the fourteenth day of the little woman's illness, "that we can keep her alive more than two or three days longer. She is worrying herself to death about Miss Lee."

"There is something strange about her devotion to the girl," replied the Colonel. "Evelyn used to say that Edna, during her sickness, could scarcely move one of her hands but that the little nurse was off her cot and at the side of the sick girl."

"I presume," said the Doctor, "that it is with the little woman as it is with nearly every one else who comes to know Miss Lee. There is a charm about that sprightly, independent, almost saucy little body, that is next to irresistible."

"I know it," said Colonel Blakeslee; and so, indeed, he did.

"If she had been here, I think we might have pulled

the little woman through; but I am afraid it is too late now. However, if she should return within a day or two, I think it would have the effect of keeping the patient alive a few days longer. How do you account for her prolonged absence?"

"I hardly know what to think. She may have met with an accident in the mountains, or she may have fallen into the hands of Glocksin's band—though I know something of Glocksin, and while he is at the head of a gang of robbers, he has many redeeming qualities. Since he was chosen leader of the band he has put a stop to many of its excesses. It is a long, hard trip and I presume she has taken a few days to rest before starting back. Then, Armby may not have been able to leave at once. In that case, she would of course, wait until he was ready to come."

"There is not another woman in ten thousand that would have undertaken such a trip," said the Doctor.

"Not one in a million!" replied the Colonel with much warmth. "We did all we could to dissuade her, and at last I put my foot down and said she should not go. The first thing any of us knew after that, she was gone."

"Well, Colonel, I must confess that I am beginning to have very grave apprehensions about her. In my opinion something ought to be done at once."

"Something is being done," said Colonel Blakeslee. "A posse of twelve picked men start day after to-morrow morning. They would have started to-day, but all could not get ready in time."

"I am greatly pleased to know it," said Dr. Wins-

low, "but I am afraid they will be too late to do our little woman any good."

After dark, on the evening before Colonel Blakeslee's men were to go in search of the missing girl, she, accompanied by Albert Armby, rode up to the front gate of Colonel Blakeslee's home, slipped to the ground without assistance, ran into the house, threw her arms around Evelyn and exclaimed,

"We are here! We are here!"

"Where is he?" asked Evelyn.

"Here I am," said Albert who had at that moment entered the hall. But it is doubtful whether but for his voice, even Evelyn would have known him, with his abundant crop of dark auburn whiskers. In a moment she was in his arms, notwithstanding the presence of Edna, and Colonel Blakeslee who had just appeared from the library. A momentary look of pain passed over Edna's face. Its cause may easily be divined. With a strong effort of will she shook off the feeling which for a moment rankled in her heart and turning to Colonel Blakeslee with a tear in her eye and a smile on her lips, extended to him her hand. This strong good man took the proffered little hand, stooped down and gently kissed the smiling girl, pretty much as he had kissed Evelyn a couple of hours before upon returning from his office. Evelyn afterwards said,

"I have a private reason of my own for believing that it was only his strong sense of propriety and his exalted respect for this little woman that prevented him from gathering her up into his arms and hugging her with all his might."

Instead, however, he turned quickly to Albert, took

his offered hand between both his own and with great earnestness and deep feeling said,

"Albert, I thank God I am permitted to see this hour!"

The joy of reunited friends is better felt than told.

Dr. Winslow called early in the evening. After greeting Albert and Edna with a genuine and cordial welcome, he motioned to Colonel Blakeslee, and the two men retired to the library while the young people removed the stains of travel and made themselves ready for the ample refreshments that were being prepared for them.

"I promised the little woman that I would send Miss Lee to her as soon as she returned," said the Doctor, "but her fever is up and she will be delirious during the night, so that it would do no good to have Miss Lee go to her before morning."

"Do you think there is any danger of her not living through the night?" asked the Colonel.

"O no. When she goes, it will be in a collapse after her fever has subsided."

"Then I think we had better say nothing to Edna about the matter until morning. She has traveled a long distance and needs to have a restful night. If she knew of the little woman's sickness, she would not even wait to eat her dinner. She thinks as much of the little woman as she would of her own mother."

"Besides that, Colonel, she seems in such high spirits that it would be too bad to break in upon her happiness with unwelcome news. So we will wait until morning and let her have the evening to enjoy herself."

They were not, however, to have their joyous evening all to themselves. The man who had been chosen as the leader of the posse to start in the morning in search of Edna, called to inquire of Colonel Blakeslee if all were in readiness and if he had any further instructions to give.

"I am glad you have come, as you have saved me the trouble of looking you up. You and your men are also saved the trouble of taking this unpleasant trip."

"You have heard from her then?"

"She is here safe and sound, and Mr. Armby with her. They arrived about an hour ago."

"Good!" exclaimed the man, who went his way. Going down the street he met a friend. "Rev. Mr. Armby is in town. He is up at Colonel Blakeslee's."

Late as it was, the news spread rapidly over the city. If ever Albert Armby had had any doubt of the hearts of the people—his fears on that score were soon dispelled. He and Edna had scarcely finished their repast, when the door bell rang and a friend stood at the door asking if he might just shake hands with Mr. Armby. Of course he was not refused; but the door had scarcely been closed when there was another vigorous pull at the bell. Then they began to arrive by twos and threes and by quartets. Then came a constant stream until the ample parlors and halls of the commodious Blakeslee mansion were filled by men and women, the rich and the poor, the high and they of low degree, waiting to grasp the hand of the man they loved and utter a "Welcome! God bless you!" and to tell him how glad they were to see his face once more.

Until nearly midnight a stream of people poured in and out. Even after the crowds had so far thinned as to warrant Colonel Blakeslee in darkening the parlors and halls and closing the door, others came; but, concluding that they had come too late, they turned away disappointed, hoping to see him the next day.

Early the next morning Edna was informed of the serious illness of the little woman and of the reasons for withholding the information from her over night. She and Evelyn hastened to the bedside of the sufferer.

The little woman occupied a suite of two rooms in a neat, comfortable but inexpensive apartment house. The larger room fronted on the street and was entered from a hall on the second floor. Back of this room and adjoining it was a smaller room which the little woman ordinarily used as a kitchen and dining-room combined. The larger room was used for a reception and living room by day, and by the use of a folding bed, was converted into a sleeping room by night. Dr. Winslow had directed that, in order to shut out the noise of the street and at the same time protect his patient against well-meaning but harmful visitors, the smaller room be fitted up for her bedroom and that callers be admitted only to the larger room.

This small suite was modestly but comfortably furnished. On a writing-desk and upon the shelves of a neat little case, was a choice though limited collection of standard books, while near by were a dozen or more albums illustrating in the highest art of engravings, some of the choicest books in her limited library.

She has been called the Little Woman in Black. While not absolutely certain who she is, one may have

put this and that together and made a shrewd guess at her identity. Certain it is that the occupant of this little nook was a person of refined taste and a cultivated mind.

When Edna and Evelyn reached these apartments, they were admitted into the large room.

"She had a feverish and restless night," said the nurse, "but the fever has subsided and left her very feeble. It would not do for you to go to her unexpected—the shock might be too great. I will go in and prepare her for your coming."

Going into the sick chamber, the nurse sat down by the bedside, took the small and emaciated hand in her own and began stroking it gently, knowing that the topic upon which she wished to speak would soon be mentioned by the patient. She did not have long to wait.

"Have you heard from Edna? Will she never come? I have made up my mind, nurse, that I will not die till she comes."

"But suppose," said the nurse, in a cheery sort of way, "she does not come at all?"

"But she will, I know she will."

"But just suppose," repeated the nurse with a broad smile and laying a good deal of emphasis on the word "suppose," "of course it is only a supposition, but suppose she does not come, or should come to town and not come to see you?"

"Who was that came in just now?" eagerly asked the little woman.

"Never mind who it is," replied the nurse, "you have not answered my question."

Then the little woman said calmly and confidently,

"She has come and is in the next room. Don't keep me waiting any longer."

Edna, who had been standing with her ear at the door which had been left slightly ajar, threw it open and with a subdued cry of mingled joy and grief clasped the feeble but uplifted hands of the little woman and began to cover them with kisses.

"Edna," said the patient, "it is well that you have come. Did he come with you?"

"Mr. Armby? yes!"

"Where is he?"

"At Colonel Blakeslee's."

"Send for him at once. Tell him that a sick woman wants to see him before she dies. Make haste—there is no time to lose."

Evelyn hastened down-stairs where the carriage was in waiting.

"Drive home quickly," she said to the driver.

Inside of thirty minutes she returned with Albert Armby. He was back at his old sadly joyous work of visiting the sick and the dying. He entered the sick chamber.

"I want to see you alone," said the little woman.

Edna and the nurse retired, the door was shut and the minister, though no longer one in the eyes of the church, was alone with the dying woman. He remained, perhaps, twenty minutes.

Evelyn was sitting in an easy chair looking out of the window, busy with her own thoughts. Edna was standing at her side toying, without knowing what she did, with Evelyn's hair. When Albert opened the

door of the sick chamber it was so noiselessly that they did not hear him, nor did they see him as he stood for a moment with his hand on the knob. If they had, they must have cried out with fright. His face was deathly pale, the sweat was standing in cold beads upon his brow, while he stood trembling in every limb. Ere the girls were aware of his presence, he had gathered Edna into his arms. He pressed her to his heart, kissed her lips and cheeks and brow and called her such endearing names as her ears had never heard. She did not resist, but yielded to his caresses with the feeling that he was actuated by motives that were holy and almost divine. Evelyn arose and looked on with mute amazement. Releasing Edna at length, but still holding her hand in his, he pointed with the other to the chamber door, as he said in a voice husky with emotion,

"Go and offer your devotion to the sweetest and best mother that ever breathed!"

It was Edna's turn to tremble and grow pale now.

"Mother!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, your mother—and mine!"

In a moment Edna was sobbing upon the breast of the little woman. Up came the emaciated arms and clasped themselves above the neck of the weeping girl.

"O, my mother! my own dear mother!" was all the poor child could say.

"My precious darling, my heart has hungered all these weary, weary years to hear that word from your lips! I vowed long ago never to tell you this; but in my weakness could not hold out to the end."

"Why, O why, my darling mother, did you not tell me this before?"

A look of pain crossed for an instant the face of the dying woman, but Edna's tears so blinded her eyes that she did not see it.

"Never mind, little one. Call me mother! It is music to my ears! It is bread to my hungry heart!"

"My mother, you must not die! You must live that your children may bless you and receive your blessing!"

"I bless my children and am blessed with their presence in my last hour! but I am not to live, my baby! I am not to live!"

"Great heavens! how blind I have been! I see it all now! I understand now those visits in my childhood; those little gifts; the painstaking care to teach me to know and to love; I understand now those outbursts of love and tears; I understand now those sobs and sighs when I lay in your arms and you thought me asleep. It is all plain now, your following me all through life and hovering about me as my good angel, and defending me in my hour of darkest trial. God be praised, my blessed, blessed mother, that I know it all now even though so late!"

"Call Albert, Edna, I think the end is at hand."

Albert was instantly at her side. She reached a hand to each of her children and closed her eyes as in sleep. A radiance that is never seen on the human face except when in closest touch with God, spread over the face of the dying woman. Her lips moved. They listened with bated breath.

"I understand it now!" she said. "God is good—that is, God is love!"

After a moment's pause she added,

"At eventime it shall be light!" They listened, but heard no more. Albert bent his ear over his mother's heart. Dear heart! it had felt its last pang, had given its last throb!

Softly close the door, please. 'Tis not for profane eyes to see, not for profane ears to hear, when one child says to another the saddest of all words, "Our mother is dead!"

She has been known as the Little Woman in Black. She has taken her place now with those who are arrayed in white. Furthermore, Edna, in her usual disregard of conventionalities, insisted that the body of her mother should be robed in pure white for its burial.

At the end of her sad and toilsome journey through life, Marian Lee sleeps up yonder in the beautiful Maplewood cemetery, a shapely marble shaft above her grave with this inscription,

OUR MOTHER!
Albert,
Edna.

CHAPTER XXXIII

RUMORS

SOON after Albert Armby's return to X——, all sorts of rumors were set afloat respecting this young gentleman and his affairs. Miss Kittie Roseate set agoing the story that Mr. Armby, during the months of his absence in the Deep River district, had "struck it rich" and was, if the truth were only known, little, if any short of being a millionaire. The widow Polly Glummer said that she had it from reliable authority that the young ex-preacher had borrowed money of his friends before going away and had returned dependent upon their generosity—not to say charity. Mrs. Glummer, who for some excellent reason of her own, was not an admirer of Mr. Armby, was, perhaps, more nearly right than was Miss Roseate. *The Morning Makeshift* published the authoritative statement that the erstwhile minister of the gospel was going to return to the profession of law where he would, it is altogether probable, have better remained in the first place; while the *Evening Shadow* was equally positive that he was either going back to his old place as pastor of Trinity or start a new and independent church of his own.

The professional gossipers were busy fixing up all manner of matrimonial programs, according to which the wedding day had already been set when Miss

Evelyn Blakeslee would become Mrs. Evelyn Armby and at the same time Mr. Armby would enter the law firm of Blakeslee and Krandall. A very different story was to the effect that Miss Blakeslee had broken off the engagement during Mr. Armby's trouble, and that now he was about to be married to the young woman who was, according to many wise and virtuous people, at the bottom of all the devilment.

The *Daily Chronicle* was one of the rare specimens of newspapers whose policy it was to get at the exact facts in any case of public notoriety, and to print only the truth, especially where individual and private matters were involved. Therefore it was, that the managing editor of that enterprising and reliable paper detailed one of its most trustworthy reporters, giving him instructions to look up the Rev. Mr. Armby and learn from him all about his finances, his health, his matrimonial affairs, his plans, prospects, intentions and everything else that could concern the public. The reporter was further instructed, to secure, if possible, Mr. Armby's consent to the publication of all these matters in the form of an interview.

He started off with no very great confidence in the issue of his effort; for he knew that several of his fellow-scribes had attempted to interview Mr. Armby, both before he went away and since his return, but had met with most polite and cordial refusals.

He went out to Colonel Blakeslee's home where he was informed that Mr. Armby had gone down town. Thinking that the Colonel might know something of Armby's whereabouts, he made straight for the lawyer's office.

"Is Colonel Blakeslee in?" he asked of the office clerk.

"He is engaged just now. Will you have a seat and wait till he is through?"

"Thank you!" said the scribe.

Now it was no fault of the reporter that the door leading from the reception room to Colonel Blakeslee's private office was just a trifle ajar; nor was he to blame that a chair stood by the side of this slightly open door; nor yet that the gentlemen inside talked loudly enough to enable him to hear nearly all they said.

When he was seated in this chair close to the open door, it soon became evident to him that either he must stop his ears or leave, or else hear a conversation not intended for his ears. Whoever heard of a newspaper reporter running away or thrusting his fingers into his ears to keep from overhearing something he wished very much to know? He stayed and heard all he could.

"Well, Armby," said Colonel Blakeslee, "we all think that in order to complete your vindication, it is necessary that the whole plot be laid bare, not sparing those who are responsible for it."

"You mistake me, Colonel," replied Armby, "if you think for a moment that I wish to oppose my judgment in this matter to that of yourself and my other friends. I am perfectly willing to abide by your decision as to what is best. But I do wish that the ends of justice might be met without the exposure."

"If the demands of justice were satisfied there are at least two or three who would dangle at the end of

a rope. We are anxious that the exposure should be so complete and the evidence so overwhelming that your worst enemy cannot doubt your integrity."

"There is something that I am more anxious about than I am concerning my own vindication; and that is that the confidence and fidelity of my friends should be fully vindicated. I only ask that you consider the effect of the exposure upon the church with which Topliff has been so long and prominently connected, also the effect upon his wife and daughters."

"That has all been fully considered and talked over among us. I have no doubt that the faith of some will be shaken and that the carpers and cynics will have their say. On the other hand the confidence of many will be restored and the mouths of many carpers will be stopped by your exoneration. As for Topliff, I have no sympathy whatever for him and but little for his wife. The fact is that our first clew to his complicity in the abominable transaction was obtained because she could not hold her gloating tongue. She must, it would seem, talk or die."

"Very well, Colonel, you have my full consent to do as you think best. The fact is I have felt all the time that I am the least competent to think clearly and to judge wisely where my own interests are so much involved."

"To go to another matter," said the Colonel, "I suppose you have not had sufficient time to reach a decision as to the proposal of your friends to establish an independent church for you."

"I am glad you have brought that subject up, Colonel," replied Armby. "I have given the proposal

much thought, but have not been able to reach a conclusion as yet. I see but one serious objection to it. If the movement should succeed—and with such people pledged to its support I do not see how it could fail—it must result in the weakening of other churches, especially Trinity, in which both you and I feel so deep an interest. I cannot see that there will be any real gain to the cause by such a division of forces. The division into denominations and separate congregations has already been carried, here and everywhere, to ridiculous extremes. Of course the bees must swarm occasionally and new hives be established; but I think it is true of churches, that the process of swarming may be carried on to such extremes that the mother hive is left helplessly weak, while there are not enough in the new hives to keep themselves alive.

"I have had some plans—or rather dreams—of practical Christian work, to which I would be willing to devote my whole life. But it is not worth the while to discuss them, as I never expect to have the means to carry them out.

"Colonel Blakeslee, I do not forget that I am talking to a man reputed to be the wealthiest in the city, when I say that my sympathies are with the poor, and that, if I return to the ministry, my work must be among them. If I put myself at the head of this proposed movement, it means to become the pastor of the rich people's church of the city. I have never hoped to accomplish much among that class of people—few men do. The scriptures themselves declare that not many wise men are called, not many great, not many mighty."

"There are two sides to that question, Armby," said the Colonel. "When that saying was uttered, it was literally true; but it would not be true if uttered to-day. Every great ruler on earth, with scarcely an exception, is a devout believer. The same is true of the great scholars, while the wealth of the world is in the hands of Christian men. Of all men who are really neglected from the Christian standpoint, the very rich are the most neglected. What will become of the neglected poor is a serious question; what will become of the neglected rich is no less serious. If you will permit me to say so, Armby, you are peculiarly fitted for good work among the more wealthy and refined. And besides all this, the surest way to benefit the poor, is to enlist the interest and sympathy of the rich. With your heart in touch with the poor, it would be the greatest blessing that ever came to them, if you should become the pastor of the rich."

"If I thought that were true," exclaimed Armby with much feeling, "I would accept this proposal before leaving the room! Anyhow, there is much food for thought in what you say. The fact is however, that nothing would gratify me more than to be back in my place as pastor of old Trinity."

"Why not go back then? The people whose names appear on that proposal will cooperate with you anywhere. The main thought is to keep you in the city where your services are so much needed."

There was a tone of sadness in Armby's voice when he next spoke.

"That can never be, Colonel," said he. "I must tell you that which, under other circumstances I should

keep to myself. When I first entered the church, I was perfectly sincere in taking upon myself its vows and assenting without hesitation or reservation to its doctrines and policies. Since that, I have done much reading and thinking on the subject. The effect has been to change my beliefs to such an extent as to put me out of harmony with some of the doctrines and policies of the church. On all essential points, my faith has only been strengthened by my investigations. If I were in the church, I could continue to do as I did before this unfortunate scandal arose—go on preaching my convictions, holding in abeyance the minor matters wherein I was not in harmony with the church. But in order to return to the church and ministry, I would be required to assent to every doctrine whether essential or not. This I could not do. I see now that I acted hastily in withdrawing from the church; but I did not then see how my vindication could ever be possible and thought to relieve the church of all approbrium by publicly announcing my withdrawal. If I reënter the work of the ministry, it will have to be in some such capacity as that proposed by this offer of my friends."

"You spoke, just now, Armby," said the Colonel, "of some plans you cherished, but had not the hope of carrying out for the want of means. If you do not object, I would be glad to know what they are."

"If I had it in my power, I should establish and endow two homes, which as nearly as possible should be homes in all the word implies—one for friendless women, another for friendless children."

Colonel Blakeslee did not reply for some moments.

When he again spoke, his voice was husky, as one struggling to subdue some strong emotion.

"And do you think," he at length said, "that you would accept this proposal if I should assure you that the means to establish these homes would be placed in your hands?"

"I could not do otherwise," said Armby.

"Then it is settled!"

At this important juncture, a little, short man, strode unceremoniously into the office. He appeared all the shorter because of the broad sombrero on his head, the double-breasted sack coat of ducking that came not below his hips, and the pair of boot-legs that came above his knees. His face was unshaven and his apparel travel-stained. He went up to the office clerk and demanded in a jerky sort of fashion to know if Mr. Armby was about.

"Mr. Armby is with Colonel Blakeslee in the private office," said the clerk.

"I want to see him!" said the stranger.

"Will you take a seat and wait until he is at liberty?"

"No, I won't," said the little fellow; and without further ado, started for the door of the private office. As the stranger was rather brusque in his manner, and especially as he carried an ominous looking six-shooter at his belt, the clerk quickly concluded that it was the part of wisdom to pursue a policy of conciliation. Thinking that, perhaps, the wilful little visitor meditated nothing less than the murder of Mr. Armby, the clerk stepped between the short man and the door and with one of his blandest smiles said,

"If you wish to see Mr. Armby on urgent business I will step in and tell him. What name shall I give him?"

"My name, to be sure. Whose else would you give him? Do you think Tom Sprigg would be givin' any other name than his own?"

"But, Mr. Sprigg," replied the clerk, with another of his political smiles, "I did not have the pleasure of knowing your name. I will tell him that Mr. Sprigg wants to see him."

"Tom Sprigg, if you please. No mister for me. Tell him that Tom Sprigg has an important letter for him."

"O!" said the clerk, "cannot I deliver the letter for you?"

"No, you can't. I was to give it to nobody but him."

The little fellow was beginning to lose temper and his voice arose with his ire. Armby heard and recognized the voice. Coming out of the room somewhat hastily he rushed up to the little man and grasped him warmly by the hand.

"Why, hello! Tom! I am surprised and delighted to see you. When did you reach town? What is the news from the boys? Why, it does my eyes good to see you!"

It was surprising to see how the manner of this rough mountaineer changed. Off came his hat and all was modest deference towards Mr. Armby. He was mightily pleased at the warm greeting and delivered his letter with an air of pride and importance that is said to be rather peculiar to people of diminutive stature.

"Have a seat, Tom, and do not go until I have seen you again. I will go in and look the message over and be out again in a few moments."

When Armby went back into the private office, the reporter slyly thrust his foot out so as to prevent the door from closing entirely.

"This is from Alexander Crissman, in whose hands I left my affairs in the Deep River district. A truer man I never knew. It was the understanding between us that if anything special developed he was to send me word, using a cipher so that if the message should fall into unfriendly hands no one would be the wiser. Take your pencil, Colonel, and write while I figure out the message."

This is the translation which they made out.

"Struck ore body at a hundred and fifty feet. Drifted north and south.

"Found out-cropping on mountainside three quarters of a mile east. Ore body twenty-seven feet wide and thirty-two feet deep at out crop and thirty-five feet wide at bottom of shaft. Vein dips slightly to west. Our assay two oz. gold, eight oz. silver, abundant lead. Free milling ore. Great find! Congratulations!"

When Armby lifted his face to Colonel Blakeslee's it was to meet a look of mingled astonishment and incredulity.

"Looks pretty good, doesn't it, Colonel?" said Armby.

"Good!" exclaimed the Colonel. "It is too good to be true! There have been some great finds made in these regions, but nothing approaching this. Why

man, if this report is reliable you can build all the homes for friendless women and children you please!"

There was a calm yet deep feeling in Armby's voice as he said,

"Colonel Blakeslee, I would not disguise from you if I could that I am profoundly gratified at this seeming good fortune. It is not mine, but His who made it. It shall be sacredly devoted to the Maker's use! As for the report being reliable, you would have no doubt of it if you knew Crissman as I do."

"Are you sure that your title to the property is perfectly valid?"

"On that I am not a competent authority. The papers are in my room. I will go and get them and submit them to you."

"Do so at once. If there is any flaw, it must be corrected without delay."

So Albert Armby, not forgetting again to request Tom Sprigg to wait for his return, hastened away after the papers covering the title to his newly found wealth, while the reporter hurried to the editorial rooms with his vein of rich matter for the columns of the *Chronicle.*

Early in the afternoon Armby received an urgent request from the managing editor of the *Chronicle* to call as soon as possible at the editorial rooms. Imagine his astonishment when a proof of the whole interview in Colonel Blakeslee's private office, was handed to him for his approval.

"Of course," said Armby, "you have it in your possession, and I cannot deny that it is substantially correct; but I beg of you not to print it now."

"That is asking a good deal, Mr. Armby."

"I know it; but it would be exceedingly embarrassing, not only to me, but to others, to have this appear in print at present. A little later on, we may consent to the publication of most of it."

"I will not take any unfair advantage, Mr. Armby. I only ask that when you are ready you will give the *Chronicle* the first chance."

"I will do so gladly, and I want to thank you most earnestly for the fairness with which you have treated me all through my misfortune."

"I think square dealing is as important in journalism as in any other business. If the *Chronicle* had taken sides against you then, where would it be now?"

"It is understood that this matter will not be published for the present?"

"Certainly; but I shall feel at liberty to publish a short editorial covering some points."

"Very well—only I wish you would say nothing at all about the reported discovery in the Deep River district. It may amount to nothing. If, however, it turns out well, I want to make sure of the validity of my claims before attention is directed to the find. I have only this further request—that you will not mention any other name than my own in connection with my affairs."

In the next issue of the *Chronicle* the following editorial appeared:

"Ever since the return to the city of the Rev. Albert Armby, rumor has been busy with that young gentleman's affairs. All sorts of stories are afloat respecting his plans and prospects for the future.

"While the *Chronicle* does not pretend to be in Mr. Armby's confidence, we have reason to believe that he will reënter the ministry in the near future with ample means to carry out some plans he has long cherished in behalf of the friendless women and children. It is well known that a proposal has been made, signed by many of the most wealthy and influential people of the city, to establish for him an independent church and that he has the proposition under favorable consideration.

"While nothing has yet been made public, it is well-understood that the close friends and advisers of Mr. Armby have in their possession abundant evidence for his complete exoneration. The *Chronicle* is in a position to state with entire confidence that this evidence will soon be made public and that its announcement will be in the nature of a most startling revelation of a plot to ruin Mr. Armby in which men of highest standing in the church and in society were co-conspirators with the most base and disreputable characters. Let the truth be known though the heavens fall!"

Not many days after the editorial appeared in the *Chronicle* Dr. Topliff received the following note:

"*The Rev. Dr. Augustus Topliff,*
"*City.*

"SIR:—You are respectfully requested to call at my office at two o'clock this afternoon on business which deeply concerns yourself.

"Sincerely,
"A. S. TRUMAN."

Topliff hastened immediately to the office of Jacob Sharply, but that gentleman was out of the city and

would not return until the next morning. Topliff really felt some relief because of the lawyer's absence. For some time he had feared that Sharply was his evil genius, yet was unable to break away from the lawyer's influence. He seemed under some such spell as a serpent's eye is said to produce over its victim.

"I will go," thought Topliff. "No one can be a worse enemy than he has been."

A few minutes after two o'clock the clergyman opened the door and walked into Judge Truman's office. There was a sickly attempt at his old affability as he entered; but seeing Colonel Blakeslee and Albert Armby in the room, his manner suddenly changed. He glanced uneasily about the room and at the door as if he meditated retreat.

"Doctor," said Judge Truman in a quiet, assuring tone, "I am glad you have come—be seated. You must not think I would take any advantage of you. I will state my purpose in asking you to come and then if you wish to retire you are, of course, at liberty to go."

Topliff took the proffered chair. He was unusually pale, his hands trembled and his voice was unsteady as he told the Judge to proceed.

"I want to speak to you of some matters with which you are supposed to have some connection. You know better than any one else whether this supposition is correct or not. If so, there is but one course for you to pursue; if not——"

"But, Judge Truman," interposed Topliff, "how am I to know unless——"

"I will come to that presently. We want to give

just as little publicity to these matters as possible, hence my note to you. Whether they are taken into the courts and given public notoriety will depend upon the course you may choose to pursue. In the first place I will state a case which may or may not have been a real one and then you may, if you choose, state whether you know anything about it.

"The story goes that nearly a quarter of a century ago a beautiful and intelligent young woman was left a widow with a baby boy; that she was in very destitute circumstances; that in her poverty and distress she went to her pastor for advice; that he proposed to take her into his home as housekeeper and governess of his two children on condition that she find some other home for her child; that after failing to make more satisfactory arrangements, she consented to the condition imposed; that this clergyman, by insidious and systematic methods won the affections of this woman and, taking advantage of her love and of her faith in him, accomplished her ruin; that he sent his emissary to a home established to befriend women in distress, with instructions to make arrangements for the care of the woman and the destruction of her child; that the proprietors of the home spurned the foul proposal but took the poor woman and cared for her in her distress and for the child when it was born; that soon thereafter the clergyman accepted an appointment in the far west and——"

During the recital of these alleged facts Judge Truman did not remove his stern, accusing eyes from the face of Topliff who every moment grew more agitated.

"These are lies! All abominable lies!" he burst out.

"Then," said Judge Truman coolly, "you do not know anything about this case?"

"I know nothing about it—these are old rumors that were exploded long ago."

"Then you knew something of the rumors?"

"Yes—it was all a vile slander, and I thought you, Judge Truman, above taking up an old——"

"Doctor Topliff, I would not knowingly do you any wrong. If you do not remember the particulars of this case, perhaps there are those who do."

At this moment, Caleb and Mary Hartman emerged from an adjoining room. Topliff was dumbfounded.

"I presume, my dear Doctor, that you recognize these people? Possibly they can remember some things which you seem to have forgotten."

Topliff, by a great effort regained his composure.

"Am I on trial here that witnesses are called against me?" he demanded.

"Certainly not, Doctor," replied Judge Truman with aggravating coolness. "You can retire at any moment. If you prefer to hear in open court what these people have to say, you have your choice."

Topliff listened in dogged stolidity as Hartman and his wife told their story.

"She bound us to secrecy before she would give his name. On her deathbed she left word that we were no longer bound by our promise," said Hartman as he concluded his disclosure.

"Of course we would not presume to ask a reply," said Judge Truman. "We leave it entirely to you to take any course you may think proper."

"I shall say nothing until I have talked with—until I have taken legal advice."

"Whether that is a wise conclusion, my esteemed Doctor, depends upon whose advice you take. But first I have another matter which I should like to mention to you. As you do not remember much about this unfortunate woman, it is not to be supposed that you know anything of the fate of her boy. On that point I think I can enlighten you. If my information is correct, he was deprived of a mother's care because she felt it her duty to watch over her little girl. The boy, after many hardships, finally fell into the hands of a generous-hearted man who gave him a good home and afforded him opportunities for an education. After reaching mature manhood he entered the ministry; but had the misfortune to incur the jealousy and hatred of his ecclesiastical superior, who after failing to get rid of him by creating dissatisfaction in his church, conspired with a certain shrewd lawyer and some men of disreputable character to blight the reputation and besmirch the fair name of the young minister——"

"My God can it be that—that you would accuse me of so foul a crime?"

"Certainly not, Doctor," said Judge Truman, raising his hands in protest, "most certainly not. But I simply wished to state the case, hoping for your valuable assistance in case you know anything about it."

"I know well enough what you are driving at. That is all an infamous lie! Do you suppose——"

"Wait a moment, learned Doctor," interposed Judge

Truman. "There is a man here who says he does know something."

Ned Franklin was led in leaning hard upon Albert Armby.

"Allow me to present to you my friend Mr. Edward Franklin. I presume, however, that this is not the first time you have met him."

"No, I never saw him."

"You do not know Ned Franklin?"

Topliff sprang to his feet in a rage.

"I have heard enough of this! I will not submit to this outrage any longer!"

"Just as you please, Doctor. It may be fully as interesting for you to listen to this man from the witness-stand."

Topliff rightly guessed that his only hope of escape from public exposure lay in submission.

"Well," said he with a show of defiance, "what tale has he got to tell?"

Franklin told of his connection with Armby's disgrace. From his story, Topliff caught a gleam of hope. This man knew of Topliff's connection with the conspiracy only through Sharply.

"I will deny all complicity and throw the whole thing on Sharply," thought the clergyman. Then to Judge Truman:

"I defy this man or any one else to say that I had any connection with that affair."

"I beg to assure you again, Doctor," said Judge Truman with the most exasperating suavity, "that we have not accused you of it, or of anything else. However, if I am not misinformed, this same clergyman

has concealed in a secret drawer which he is careful to keep under lock and key, the identical letter that was used to decoy the young minister to his ruin. I have a copy if you would like to see it."

This shot came like a thunderbolt. Topliff sat and looked at Judge Truman in dumb amazement. After a moment the Judge continued,

"But before you go there is still one thing more I wish to mention: Do you know anything about what became of the child of Marian Lee? No? Well, I have been informed that the mother, abandoned by the man who should have befriended her at any cost, has devoted her whole life to the protection of her child, though the child knew it not. The current of events carried both mother and child far away from the scenes of their earlier life. The child, so I am informed, grew to be a beautiful and accomplished woman but was reduced to the direst straits through the connivance of this same recreant clergyman. The mother still watched over her daughter, providing her with daily bread while the father was reducing her to starvation that he might bring her into subjection to his cruel lust. I am further informed that he went to her room at the hour of her greatest need with offers of the basest nature accompanied with threats of dire disaster if she refused. It is also stated that when she started with a message to the young minister who was, with her, the victim of this man's perfidy, she was followed by a trusted accomplice of this clerical conspirator, and that the two plotters were overheard laying their plans to thwart her purpose even if they must murder her ——"

Judge Truman paused. Topliff's head had dropped forward—his chin against his breast; his lips had fallen apart, his face was ashen, great beads of sweat were standing upon his brow while both eyes were wide open as if staring at something on the floor. He tottered to his feet like a man of eighty, staggered across the room, opened the door and left without a word.

The next morning Topliff called at Sharply's office.

"Is Mr. Sharply in?" he inquired of the office boy.

"No, sir; it is not quite time for him yet. He will be here in a few minutes, sir. Will you be seated till he comes?"

Topliff was shown into Sharply's private office. While he is waiting the coming of the lawyer, it is a good time to scrutinize him closely. The change since the ordeal of yesterday is marked and distressing. What has been described as "a butter-milk complexion" has become decidedly sallow with a greenish tinge like the color of one who has suffered a long time with chronic jaundice. His face is drawn and haggard; deep furrows are plowed about his eyes and mouth; his coarse, long hair has grown much grayer and is not combed with the usual care; his furtive grayish eyes wander in dull listlessness from object to object; his pudgy fingers toy nervously with the clerical hat he holds, while his whole appearance and manner indicate that either he is suffering from some incurable malady or has something on his conscience more insufferable than the most malignant disease. It is evident that he has no heart for the coming interview, but waits for it in some such mood as one waits for the execution of a sentence.

Sharply entered the office in his usual cool and sinister manner; but upon seeing Topliff, was shocked at the woe-begone appearance of the clergyman.

"Why, Topliff, what ails you? You are sick, man."

Topliff's voice was tremulous and uncertain as he slowly replied,

"Yes, Sharply, I am a sick man both in body and in mind."

"What is the matter now?" asked Sharply with impatience.

"Matter enough! Have you read the *Chronicle?*"

"O, is that all? You mustn't be so easily frightened. That editorial was inspired by Blakeslee or some one else of his ilk for the purpose of scaring somebody into a confession. Let them smoke away."

"But that is not the worst of it. Truman decoyed me into his office yesterday. Blakeslee and Armby were there and I——"

"Confessed, did you?"

A keen sword gleamed from each of Sharply's cold eyes, before which Topliff cowed in abject servility.

"I confessed nothing," said he, "but——"

"Made some damaging admissions."

"Now, Sharply, let me tell you what happened. They know everything. They are guessing at nothing. That girl is my own—great God! how shall I say it?"

"How do you know all this, Topliff?"

"The little woman who died recently was the mother, and the people who took care of her when the child was born, are here and know all about it.

She told Armby on her deathbed and released these people from their pledge of secrecy."

"Well, Topliff, this is an old score of yours and has nothing to do with our affair."

"It has much to do with it. The girl was in an adjoining room at Hartman's inn and heard every word between you and me that night."

"The devil she did!"

"Yes, and that was the reason of her flight."

"We must put on a bold front, Topliff. It will be her word against yours and mine."

"That won't do, Sharply. The worst of it all is that Ned Franklin was wounded in an affair in the Deep River country. Thinking he was going to die, he made a full confession of the whole ill-fated affair."

"Where is he?" asked Sharply.

"He is here in the city."

"Well, I will soon fix him."

"How?"

"I don't know—might buy him off and send him away; or —— Mike Karns will do anything I tell him to do. He don't dare refuse."

"But Ned is in the hands of Blakeslee and Armby."

"I don't care a damn where he is. There's some way to get at him. I mean to fight this thing to a finish."

"Well, Sharply, you may do as you please; as for me, I mean to make a clean breast of the whole thing."

Topliff fairly shrank within himself and would have sunk through the floor, had that been possible, beneath the cold, yet fierce and ominous glare of

Sharply's eyes. Neither of the men spoke for a few seconds. At length the lawyer said, in tones that sent a shudder through the preacher's frame,

"Utter but one word implicating me, and it were better that you were a thousand leagues in hell!"

With this he went over to his desk, took out some papers and began to examine them as coolly as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Sharply," said Topliff after a few moments' silence, "I did not mean to implicate you. If there were any way of escape, I would go on with the fight; but ever since that night at Hartman's, I have felt that the evil day would surely come. For me there is but one thing left—confession."

The lawyer sat for a few moments as if debating something with himself. At length he said:

"After all, Topliff, that may be the best way out for both of us. Give me a little time to think of it. Meantime you promise that you will do nothing until I see you again."

"Certainly."

"Meet me then, here, say at ten o'clock to-morrow."

"All right."

The men shook hands and Topliff went his way.

CHAPTER XXXIV

VENGEANCE IS MINE!

On the evening of the day when Sharply and Topliff had their interview, Jack Duval stole into the outskirts of the city under the cover of darkness and made his way to a little one-story adobe house which stood apart from any other habitation.

Without dismounting, he placed the thumbs of both hands to his mouth with the palms cupped together and blew a blast which resembled the cry of a jackal. This sound was thrice repeated, when a low, thick set, repulsive looking man, thrust out at the door a small round head, the hair of which was cropped short and stood out like bristles from the scalp. He cautiously looked about, and then putting his hands to his mouth gave answer to the sound he had heard. It was a part of the freemasonry by which a band of more than a hundred desperate and lawless men made themselves understood one to another. In a moment more Jack dismounted at the door of the cabin. The response to his call was a signal that the way was clear.

"May the devil take me if it ain't Jack!" exclaimed the bristly head.

"Hold yer clack, you d—d fool! Do ye want to tell all the neighborhood?"

"Ha! ha! ha! That's a good'n. Neighborhood! as if anybody lived in hearin' distance of the cry of a

jackal. You're a brick! Don't yer know that by comin' here you're stickin your neck inter the halter? And there'd be many willin' hands to pull the rope, yer bet!"

"I'm here on biz, halter or no halter; an' I want you to put my hoss in the stable, give 'im plenty to eat an' then to go an' tell Jake Sharply that I want ter see 'im afore he goes to bed."

Jack spoke to the lord of the adobe hut as one who expected to be obeyed, both by the man to whom he spoke and the man to whom the message was sent.

"Sure!" was the other's reply. He led the visitor's horse to a small shed stable in the rear, while Jack entered as if he had been the owner of the hut. This hut consisted of two rooms, one where the cooking and eating were done, the other for all other living purposes. It was the latter room which Jack entered. Two or three broken and rickety chairs on an uncarpeted floor, a filthy excuse for a bed in one corner, and a table made of the boards of a dismantled dry-goods box constituted the furnishings of this dingy room. The weird shadows cast by the flickering rays of a smoking kerosene lamp rendered this place gloomy and forbidding, while the lamp used filled the air with stifling odors.

Beside the makeshift of a table, sat a woman, with low forehead, protruding cheek bones, small black eyes set well back in her head; her coarse, black hair falling down about her neck and shoulders. She was clad in an ill-fitting calico dress, the glaring colors of which were obscured by the accumulated filth of many months' wear. She had every appearance of being, as

she was, an Indian squaw. When Jack entered, she scarcely appeared to notice him.

"Mag," said he, "I'm hungry. Hev you got anything to eat?"

She made no reply; but arose, and went into the other room. Soon the clank of cooking pans and the rattle of dishes told of the preparation she was making.

Mike Karns, for it was he who made this den the place of his abode, soon returned, took his well-worn hat, donned his greasy coat and set off to deliver his message. Meantime Jack had eaten his supper, a meal which was to be commended neither for its variety nor its cleanliness. But Jack Duval was used to such fare, and he did not think of complaining.

During the meal, the squaw, who had placed everything there was to eat upon the table, sat on a box that was used for a stool, smoked a corncob pipe and said not a word. Jack did not try to engage her in conversation, knowing that she would not talk, however much he might ply her with questions. Furthermore, he himself was of rather a taciturn disposition and had matters of his own to think about.

In about an hour, Karns returned and reported that Sharply would come immediately. Soon the sound of horses' feet and the rumble of a buggy were heard. Both ceased in front of the hut. Sharply opened the door and entered without knocking. Jack made a sign to Mike, who went into the kitchen and closed the door between the two rooms. But this did not prevent him from keeping his ear to the opening of the door through which the latch operated, and listening

to as much of the conversation as he could hear. Meantime his spouse, with pipe in mouth, sat stolidly upon her throne.

The conversation between Jacob Sharply and Jack Duval need not be related at this time. Suffice it to say that it was arranged between them that Jack should remain at Karns' hut until the following night when Sharply would call again.

Topliff went to Sharply's office according to agreement and was greeted by the lawyer with his old time cordiality. Sharply could not have been more tranquil if he had been in closest harmony with all the world. His serenity and cordial greeting did much to put the clergyman at ease.

"How are you this fine morning, Doctor?" inquired the lawyer. "Didn't sleep well? I had a splendid night's sleep and feel tip-top."

"I wish I felt as you do!"

"Never mind, Doctor. Cheer up. There is nothing like keeping a stiff upper lip."

"Sharply, you are the strangest man I ever met. I believe you would keep as cool as an icicle if the world were on fire."

"Of course I would. What's the sense of flying into a flutter when things go wrong? It only makes matters worse."

"From your cheerful mood, I take it that you have hit upon some happy solution of the tangled problem of yesterday."

"To tell you the truth, Topliff, I have scarcely thought about it. I have had so much else to look after. The fact is that I am up to my ears in work

and shall be exceedingly busy all day, as I am going out of town early in the morning."

"Out of town! Where are you going?"

"Into the mountains for two or three days' hunt. By the way, Topliff, can't you go with me? We can then get away where we have nothing else to think about and decide upon the best course to pursue."

"I would like to go, Sharply, but really, I don't feel well enough."

"So much the greater reason why you should go. It will cheer you up, give you a good appetite and restore your old hopeful spirits."

Topliff was passionately fond of hunting and fishing. The fact is, that carried away by his love of the sport, he had spent many a day angling for trout along the mountain streams or hunting for deer on the tablelands and in the valleys, when he ought to have been following his calling as a fisher of men, or as a shepherd seeking the sheep that was lost. Sharply's proposal struck him favorably, and he finally agreed. All the lawyer's conversation was of a character now to lead the clergyman's thoughts away from the matter that was really uppermost in the minds of both. When Topliff left the office, he was in a much more cheerful mood than when he came.

That night Sharply paid his promised visit to Karns' cabin. Again he and Jack Duval were left alone in the dingy front room. Sharply remained but for a few moments.

Shortly after the lawyer left, Jack called for his horse and disappeared in the darkness. He rode nearly the whole night, and when the sun arose, he was many

miles from the city of X—— sound asleep under a cluster of pine-trees, with his blanket for a bed and his saddle for a pillow.

The same morning Sharply and Topliff, fully equipped for their hunting trip, boarded a stage for a fifty miles' ride to a small village in a fertile little valley in the very heart of the mountain region. Here they rested for the night. Bright and early the next day, accompanied by a guide with a packhorse, they struck off into the mountains in search of game. By noon, two fine deer were strapped to their pack-saddle. Three o'clock came, and it was about time that they should begin to work their way back towards the village. They were pretty well up amid the mountains and could overlook the valley into which they must descend in order to return to the village.

"We must have one more deer," said Sharply. "Then we will have one apiece. Topliff, you descend through this gulch to the valley, and the guide and I will follow this other draw, reach the valley some distance below and work our way along the foot-hills till we meet you. I think by this means we may scare up some more game."

Topliff acted upon this suggestion, and in a few minutes had descended nearly to the valley. At length he came out upon a flat surface of rock covered over with moss. From this point he had a fine view of the valley and of the mountains on the other side but a short distance away. He stopped, let the butt of his rifle down at his side and, resting upon his gun, fell into the old train of thought over which he had brooded so much of late. He became so deeply ab-

sorbed in his reverie as to be wholly oblivious to all else. Suffering from fear of imminent exposure and tormented by the stings of an outraged conscience, such thoughts as these surged through his troubled brain:

"When I was a young man what a bright future I seemed to have before me! Alas! when one takes the first false step he little knows to what end it will lead. It was a fatal day when I wronged that poor little woman who trusted me so implicitly. I was then too craven hearted to stand by her in her hour of trouble, but left her to bear the burden of our sin alone—our sin—no! my sin, for she sinned not, poor thing, but was cruelly sinned against. When I came out into this wild region, it was in the hope of getting far away from the woman I had wronged; but fate has followed me with the persistence of death itself. My life has been for all these years one continuous act of hypocrisy. The consciousness that a hidden sin is gnawing at one's heart, weakens the moral fibre of the whole man. In my envy and jealousy of Armby, I have permitted myself, without intending it, to be drawn on from one wrong to another until, Great God! I have been in intention at least, guilty of complicity in murder itself. In my unscrupulous passion, I have been pursuing with relentless cruelty my own flesh and blood! Even now, if I could escape the consequences of the past by plunging headlong into further and, if possible greater crime, I know I would do it. But nothing will avail me. A relentless fate is upon my track and I can now recall no merciful promise of the Scriptures I have so shamefully perverted. All that

will come to me by day or by night is 'vengeance is Mine, I will repay saith ——'"

At this instant there was a puff of blue smoke from behind a rock on the opposite side of the valley, and before the crack of the rifle had traversed the intervening space, Topliff lay stretched upon the earth, his hands clutching convulsively at the moss on which he lay, his eyes rolled back in the death agony. The struggle was brief, for a rifle ball had, with unerring aim, penetrated the dead man's heart.

"There," said Sharply to the guide. "Topliff has got another shot at a deer."

They quickened their pace and soon came to where the body lay.

"Great heavens, Topliff is shot!"

With these words, Sharply bent down over the dead body, felt for the pulse, listened for the heart-beats, and with every evidence of profound grief, pronounced him dead.

"His gun," said the guide, "must have accidentally gone off—no, it is still loaded."

"This is a horrible mystery!" said Sharply. "To think that our trip should end so!"

"I wonder if any of Glocksin's band could be prowling around."

"I had not thought of that," replied Sharply.

The guide looked uneasily about as he said,

"Let us get away from here! There is no telling how soon they may take a shot at us."

The body was placed upon the packhorse and the gruesome journey to the village was commenced.

Who was the assassin guilty of this foul murder?

Certainly Jacob Sharply was not, nor could he ever be suspected of the deed; for was not the guide with him every moment of the time? Who, then, was the murderer? No one knew. On the other side of the valley, a man with a dark complexion, small black eyes and a criminal countenance, pulled his slouched hat a little further over his eyes, mounted his horse and disappeared over a mountain trail. That was all.

CHAPTER XXXV

WEDDING BELLS

SOON after the death of Topliff, Armby was in consultation with Judge Truman, Colonel Blakeslee and two or three others of his closest friends.

"The grave," said Armby, "as well as charity, should cover a multitude of sins. So far as we are concerned, let us be as silent concerning Topliff's part in that transaction as the grave itself."

"Of course we are all agreed to that," said Colonel Blakeslee; "but I do not see how we can give publicity to the matter without revealing his connection with it."

"The fact is, gentlemen," said Judge Truman, "that the whole thing is pretty well understood. You can't keep those things from the public very long. While the newspapers are keeping quiet, the people are talking. Nobody whose opinion is worth noticing believes Mr. Armby guilty of anything dishonorable. Why not let the matter die a natural death?"

"I for one," said Colonel Blakeslee, "am not satisfied to let it go that way. Armby's disgrace was made as public as possible, while his accusation and trial were made a matter of permanent record. I feel like insisting that his vindication also be made public and a matter of record."

After a moment's silence Judge Truman said,

"There is but one way to do so, and that is to have the case called in court and dismissed for the want of evidence. If we lay all the facts before the Judge privately, he will I think, in dismissing the case, state that the facts brought to his knowledge leave no doubt of Mr. Armby's innocence. This can be made a part of the record and published in the papers. Will that satisfy you, Colonel?"

"Under all the circumstances that seems the best we can do."

Accordingly "the Armby affair" was made a matter of history, and Albert took up again the work he had laid down.

In due time a handsome fire-proof business block was erected in the heart of the city. Within this block was provided a large auditorium constructed with reference to comfort and convenience rather than architectural or decorative display. The opening services were held in the afternoon on the Sabbath—the pastors of all the churches in the city being invited to be present. One of them preached the opening sermon.

At the close of the services, Colonel Blakeslee was seen to arise from his place and with Evelyn leaning on his arm, approach the altar of this new temple of worship. As they left their seat, Evelyn removed a loose cloak she had worn, when it was discovered that she was robed in wedding attire. Albert Armby, descending from the platform, met them before the altar where the brief and impressive ceremony was performed that united him and Evelyn Blakeslee in the sacred bonds of marriage.

After the marriage Edna, of course, went to live with her brother; and the Colonel spent nearly all his evenings at Armbys'. What was more natural? Was not Evelyn his daughter just the same? No, not quite the same. She had forsaken father and would have forsaken mother had one been living, to go with him to whom she now owed a higher allegiance. She was not Evelyn Blakeslee any more, she was called by another's name. Make the most of your daughter, my fathers and mothers, while she is with you; for when she goes from you to establish a home of her own, she is never the same to you again. You may love her just as deeply and realize for the first time how strong is your love for her, but her heart has gone out to another and while she may not love you less, she loves him more.

Colonel Blakeslee was spending his evenings at Armbys'. He was, no doubt, attracted by Evelyn; for his welcome by her and Albert was ever most cordial, while his dinners and evenings with them were occasions of genuine enjoyment both to them and him.

What was there about the quiet elegance of that great old mansion of his, to make it attractive to him, now that the light which had been its charm for more than twenty years had gone to illuminate the home of another? What enjoyment could the old housekeeper and the half dozen servants afford him, now that Evelyn had gone? Therefore he spent his evenings at Armbys'—and Edna was there.

One night he came to dinner when Albert and Evelyn were away and Edna was compelled to play the

hostess. This she was capable of doing under any circumstances; but more especially when Colonel Blakeslee, whom she knew so well and admired so much, was her guest.

After dinner she and the Colonel retired to one of the parlors, where she entertained him to his very great delight, not with music, but by her sparkling. wit, her ready repartee and her inimitable ridicule of some nonsensical fads. Above all was he charmed by the glow of happiness which rendered her face radiant.

This girl who had been as destitute of comeliness in her youth as the stem of the coming flower, had in her maturity, unfolded a beauty as sweet and as enchanting as that of the rose. On this particular evening her charms of mind, of face and of manners were next to irresistible.

The afternoon following Colonel Blakeslee's evening with Edna, she returned from a long ride, her cheeks aglow and her eyes sparkling with exhilaration. She found Albert in his study examining some plans for his homes for friendless women and children. Her close-fitting riding habit set off her charming little body to perfection, while the glow of her face and sparkle of her eyes greatly heightened her fascinating beauty. Albert dropped his papers and had her in his arms in an instant.

"My mischievous little pet," said he, kissing her, "if it were not for making you vain, I would tell you that I never saw you look so charming. It is a wonder that some handsome young fellow doesn't fall madly in love with you!"

"There is no one going to do so foolish a thing as

that, and it wouldn't do him any good if he did. Say, brother," she added in some confusion, "I want to have a little talk with you and Evelyn."

Evelyn was called and the three sat down together in his study.

"Edna says she wants to have a little talk with us," said Albert with a sly wink at his wife.

Edna held in her hand a silver-mounted riding whip which she carried for the purpose of stroking her horse's mane and brushing off any presumptuous fly that might light upon his neck. She blushed till her face was crimson, looked down at the toe of her shoe which peeped out from beneath her riding-skirt, and toyed nervously with the handle of her whip. Albert knew there was something unusual coming.

"Well," said he, "what is it?"

She gave him a gentle stroke on the sleeve with her whip and said, half laughing and yet with a tear in her eye,

"Guess!"

"O, some young fellow has proposed. How near the truth am I, Miss Puss?"

"Colonel Blakeslee is the young fellow!" said she, and then covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears.

Albert and Evelyn could not help laughing outright, even though there were tears in their laughter.

"Come, little one," said he with great tenderness, "we know all about it. The Colonel told Evelyn before he told you; and she, of course, told me. I take it that he proposed to you last night, didn't he?"

Her only answer was two or three nods of the head

while she caught her breath with a half sob and a half sigh like one who has found relief in tears.

"What did you tell him?" asked Armby.

She lifted her face, while a smile shone through her tears like a sunbeam through rain-drops after a passing shower. By a strong effort of her will she overcame her emotions and spoke freely and frankly.

"I was so taken by surprise," said she, "that I hardly knew what to say and scarcely remember now what I did say. I told him that I held him in the highest esteem and owed him a debt of gratitude I could never pay. O, Albert, I am not worthy to become the wife of such a man as Colonel Blakeslee!"

"My dear Edna," said Albert seriously, "Colonel Blakeslee is the last man in the world who would want you to become his wife through a sense of gratitude. I know he would agree with me when I tell you never to bestow your hand where your heart has not already gone."

"That is almost exactly what he said to me: but how is one to know? I have loved you from the first time we ever met. I think if you had asked me to marry you and Evelyn had not been in the way I should have done so. You have told me since our dear mother died, that you loved me all the time, but that such a thing as marriage never even occurred to you. Of course we both understand it now. I do love Colonel Blakeslee and know I could be so happy with him; but then everybody loves him—they can't help it."

"Did you ever notice," remarked Evelyn, "how,

when one really falls in love with another, it seems a wonder that everybody else does not do likewise?"

Well, no one ever had a more loving or lovable little wife than Colonel Blakeslee found in Edna, at least that is what he thought; and certain it is that no woman ever had a nobler or more devoted husband than Edna found in Colonel Blakeslee. She flooded his life and his home with sunshine, while she found in him the fulfilment of her highest earthly joys.

CHAPTER XXXVI

LEAVE TAKING

THE years went sweetly and swiftly by.

Edna, who had kept up an unbroken correspondence with her old friends the Thorntons, was rejoiced to learn that fortune had again smiled on them and brought them renewed prosperity. Time and again she urged them to pay her a visit. At last she had the great joy of welcoming them to her own elegant home.

On the morning after their arrival, Edna said,

"I want to take you down and introduce you to my brother. I know you will like each other."

"We are very anxious to meet him and to learn more of his work. His name is well known in C——, where there is a very general desire to establish a movement similar to his."

Armby had his office in the church block where he spent from twelve-thirty to two o'clock every afternoon receiving any who wished to see him. Edna opened the door without knocking and ushered in her two friends.

"Albert, this is papa and mama Thornton of whom I have told you so much."

Armby extended both his hands and received the visitors with earnest cordiality.

"I cannot tell you," said he, "how glad I am to

meet the friends to whom both Edna and I owe so much."

"The pleasure is mutual, I assure you," replied Mr. Thornton. "Edna has written so much about you that it is like meeting a familiar friend."

After a short visit, Edna said,

"Come, mama Thornton, let us leave these men to themselves and go out and see the city. Albert, you are to take papa Thornton to lunch and bring Evelyn up to dinner. You won't see any more of us till then. Good-bye!"

Kissing both the men, she took Mrs. Thornton's arm and disappeared.

"The same impulsive, generous girl!" exclaimed Mr. Thornton.

"Thank goodness!" replied Albert, "her impulses are always right."

"I can see that she has toned down a good deal. That is natural though. She was but a girl when she came to us—she is a woman now."

"When I think of what she has passed through, it is a wonder to me that she has so much vivacity, and sheds so much sunshine about her."

Gradually the men drifted into a discussion of Armby's duties.

"I wish you would tell me, Mr. Armby, about your church organization and methods of work."

"I shall esteem it a privilege to give you any information I can. Our church is a corporate body. Everything pertaining to the property and the finances of the organization is under the management of a board of trustees while all matters of a spiritual character are

under the supervision of a board of managers. Each board is composed of nine members who are elected by the members of the church. Three members of each board are elected each year."

"May any person be a member of both boards?"

"No; but the two boards may meet jointly at the call of the pastor who is ex-officio president of the joint board."

"Do all the members have a voice in the election of your boards?"

"All who are eighteen years old or over. We make no distinction on account of sex, all are eligible both to vote and to hold office."

"What are the conditions of membership in your church, Mr. Armby?"

"To become a member, one must first be recommended to the board of directors by a member of the church and approved by a majority vote of that board. On any Sunday after such approval, the pastor may formally induct the applicant into the church in the presence of the congregation. Yes, we require baptism; but the candidate for admission chooses the mode by which it is administered."

"I understand that members of other churches may become members of yours and still retain their former church relations."

"That is correct. This church is not even a competitor of other organizations. Our aim is to help, not to hinder. We hold our services at three in the afternoon so as not to interfere with other services."

"Are the other churches friendly to yours?"

"Most cordially. There is not a Sabbath when I do

not have invitations to preach in other churches. I always accept when my duties permit."

"Do you not have a creed and some conditions of membership?"

"Certainly. Our creed—we call it a declaration, but it amounts to the same thing—is part of our application for membership. Here is a copy of it."

Albert handed Mr. Thornton a neatly printed pamphlet, setting forth the aims and general methods of the church, the constitution and laws for its government, the declaration required of its members, and a list of officers and members. The aims of the church are very briefly stated in the following language:

"The objects and aims of this organization are to promote Christian faith, cultivate the Christian virtues and relieve the distress of those who suffer either in body or mind."

The following is the form of application for membership:

"To the board of directors: Having been informed of the objects and aims of the Mission Church of X——, I hereby make application for membership therein; and, in so doing, pledge myself to do all in my power to promote said objects and aims. I also promise to be governed, in my relations to the church, by its constitution and laws. And I do hereby declare that I believe God to be a personal, just and loving Heavenly Father; that, through Jesus Christ His Son, He forgives the sins of those who believe in Him and walk humbly before Him; that by the aid and energizing influences of the Holy Spirit He renews, strengthens, comforts and succors those who put their trust in

Him and seek to do His will; that the Bible contains the revealed will of God to man, teaches him how best to live in this present world and points him to the better and enduring life beyond.

"I further declare that, if admitted to membership, I will abstain from all vice and immorality, and from all language and conduct of a demoralizing tendency; and will, to the best of my ability, seek to cultivate within myself and others all the virtues belonging to the Christian character."

"That is very brief, Mr. Armby; but also quite comprehensive. Is every one who enters your church required to make that declaration?"

"Except children under sixteen years of age. They are admitted without formal application; but when they reach the age of sixteen they are required to subscribe to the declaration."

"I understand that you have very fine music in connection with your services. Will you give me some idea of that feature of your work?"

"With pleasure. We use the grand old hymns and tunes that have come down as a rich legacy from the centuries of the past. No light catchy stuff enters into our worship, either in hymn or anthem. We have an orchestra of from fourteen to twenty pieces. The players are the best in the city. The orchestra accompanies, with the grand organ, all our hymns, solos and anthems, and usually plays a prelude, interlude and postlude. These are always selected from the classics—such as Wagner, Gounod and Verdi."

"I have been informed that you admit to your service by ticket. Are not all welcome?"

"That is merely a precautionary measure to prevent overcrowding. There are nearly seven thousand seats in the auditorium. We issue as many tickets as there are seats. It is well known where these tickets can be had for the asking. Before we adopted this plan the house was packed almost to suffocation. In case of fire and panic the results might have been appalling."

"The running expenses of such an institution must be very great, Mr. Armby."

"Yes, somewhat. We own the business block of which our auditorium is a part. The revenues from rentals are considerable, and our voluntary contributions are liberal. Everybody is expected to contribute according to his ability. But if one has nothing to give he is just as welcome as if he were a millionaire."

"I understand that you do not accept anything for your services," said Mr. Thornton.

"That is hardly correct. Fortunately, I am so situated as not to need the salary the church pays; but it pays it nevertheless. We have several auxiliary movements and institutions under this church—among them a home for friendless women and another for friendless children. I divide my salary, share and share alike between these two homes. I would be glad to have you visit these institutions—they are accomplishing glorious results."

"My visit would not be complete without seeing them."

"Edna is a great help to me in all my work; but the homes are her special care. She will be delighted to show you through them and introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. Hartman who have supervision of them."

"They are the people with whom Edna was traveling when she came to us!"

"The same—and they are pure gold!"

"While I knew them but for a day I have always thought of them with a kindly interest. I shall greatly enjoy meeting them again. I am informed, Mr. Armby, that you are the owner of the celebrated Jennie Bascomb mine and that you have other extensive investments."

"Really, Mr. Thornton, I will have to refer you to Colonel Blakeslee on that subject. I pay scarcely any attention to business matters. Preachers, you know, are proverbial failures as business men. I leave my temporal affairs in more competent hands and devote myself wholly to my work."

Mr. Thornton, in telling his wife that night of his visit to Armby, said,

"We were interrupted at this point by the entrance of a woman leading by the hand the sweetest and most adorable little girl that ever mortal eyes beheld. Such trasparent complexion, such luminous brown eyes, such lustrous auburn hair I have never before seen in all my life.

"'Hello! Edna,' cried Armby. He had the little cherub in his arms in an instant and for a moment was oblivious to all else in the caresses bestowed upon his child. After a moment, still holding the child in his arms, he kissed her mother affectionately and then introduced her to me as his wife. Never have I beheld a more lovely woman. I no longer wondered at such a child when I beheld in her the blending of two such lives. I was about to depart that their happiness

might not be marred or restrained by my presence, when he said,

"'I go out to the state prison to-morrow, Mr. Thornton, to hold services for the convicts. Would you like to go with me?'

"'With all my heart,' said I."

Albert and Mr. Thornton went out to the prison as planned. As they were returning after the services, Mr. Thornton asked,

"Who was that thin, swarthy convict in striped prison garb, with closely cropped hair and small black eyes? He stared at you during the services with a look of insane hatred."

"That man? Why, that was Jacob Sharply. He is serving a life sentence for complicity in the murder of the Rev. Augustus Topliff."

"You don't tell me!" exclaimed Mr. Thornton. "How did they ever find him out?"

"Jack Duval, on the day before he was hanged, made a confession, giving a long list of the men he had killed. Among them was Topliff. He also implicated Sharply and put the authorities on track of evidence to prove his statements. Sharply was arrested and after a long trial, was convicted and sentenced to the penitentiary for life."

* * * * * *

Having had a glimpse of Albert Armby, of his work and of his domestic joys, it is well to meet once more before taking final leave of them, some other friends —Colonel Blakeslee with his lion's nerve and woman's heart—his cheery, happy little wife than whom there

is not a more highly honored woman in town. She is shrewd enough to attribute no small part of her popularity to the fact that she is the wife of one of the wealthiest and most highly respected men in the city.

It would have been amusing, had it not been contemptible, the way many ladies shifted in their attitude towards Edna after she had become Mrs. Blakeslee. She avoided them as much as possible; but when compelled to come in contact with them, she bore herself with such freezing courtesy and with such disdainful politeness, that they were glad to escape to some more congenial social atmosphere.

She is right. They deserve it, and she has not in her nature the stuff of which hypocrites are made. She does not forget,—how can she? the treatment she received from them in other days. But those days are gone, thank goodness! Let them go,—no good can come from living them over again.

The ample Blakeslee mansion is often thrown open to as many guests as it will hold. Edna, in issuing invitations, regards neither the rich nor the poor, the high nor the low. She seeks, however, to bring together on any given evening only such people as will be congenial to each other; but they are all equally welcome and are treated alike.

She never got over her disregard for conventionalities; she did as she pleased and, with her good judgment and excellent heart, she generally did what was right.

She enjoyed so-called polite society, that is society in which there is little else than good manners, but soon wearied of it. Just an occasional taste of the

upper crust was enough for her. She used to say: "It is too artificial. I like wax flowers, but prefer the natural growth."

In a letter to Mrs. Thornton she said:

"I am just as incorrigible in the matter of Pyrenees society as ever. Not long ago Dan—that's my horse you know—and I went mountain-climbing. We climbed as high as we could go together. There was still a higher point I was bound to reach. So I dismounted and tied Dan to a projecting rock,—not to keep him from running away, but to keep him from trying to follow me. I clambered up the rocky steep, over the flinty ice and the glistening snow until at last I reached the very summit of the mountain peak. The top of it was not much larger than the top of a haystack and was so slippery I could hardly stand.

"Never before had I beheld such grandeur! Far, far beneath was the teeming valley with its dust and smoke, its trees and fields and toils. The air was so thin and transparent that there seemed no limit to my range of vision. For a few moments I was oblivious to everything except this entrancing scene.

"I wore a short-skirted riding habit with no wraps. Soon the pavement of ice began to chill my feet; a sensation of coldness crept through and through my frame and I began to shiver with cold. I became conscious of an oppressed sensation about my lungs as if for want of breath. I looked at my hands. They were purple and my nails were blue. This is splendid, thought I, but the kind that chills to death!

"I was glad to get down to lower levels where trees and grasses grow, where flowers bloom, where

fields of grain wave to passing winds, where orchards and vineyards teem with ripening fruit, where one can listen to human voices, to the song of birds and even hear the lowing of cows.

"The higher altitudes of society may do for show; but let me live from day to day, along the levels where the rare flower of sincere friendship blooms,—where loving and sympathetic hearts beat in unison with my own!"

THE END